

Winnetka-GlencoePatch

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Government

Q&A: SEN. JEFF SCHOENBERG ON WILLOW ROAD

Northfield has a solution, Schoenberg has a solution, but the senator is confident the outcome will mirror four-lane-plan wishes.

By [Sofia Resnick](#) | November 16, 2010

Both sides see a solution, but they can't seem to see eye-to-eye. Northfield, the village that houses the stretch of Willow Road in question, and the senator who represents it have been tangled in disputes over which side has wasted money championing their own visions. Meanwhile, Willow Road remains problematic and its future uncertain. The state of the road has once again been put in the hands of a [study group](#) formed by the [Illinois Department of Transportation](#) and citizens representing Northfield, Winnetka, Northbrook and Glenview. Ultimately, IDOT will decide the road's design in the fall of 2011. Recently, Patch sat down with state Sen. Schoenberg (9th District) to discuss his side of the debate. He said he knows exactly what Willow Road is eventually going to look like, and he doesn't think Northfield is going to like it.

Patch: So all this controversy surrounding Willow Road, at the end of the day, we're just talking about 1.2 miles, right?

Sen. Jeffrey Schoenberg: You know what we're really talking about? The engineers want to pave the part of the road that people go around, drive on, and then hit somebody. They want to curb it and then have narrower lanes. ... Traffic wouldn't necessarily go faster; it would go smoother. There's not going to be any five-, six-lane super-highway. That's just overheated rhetoric by a group of political leaders who are trying to generate more than the minimal amount of interest in their position that's been shown.

Patch: So why has it taken so many decades to fix the road?

Schoenberg: One of the reasons why it's taken so many decades is because Northfield has invested a lot of money in lobbyists, lawyers and public relations firms to block any change in what they want, which happens to be at the expense of all the surrounding communities.

Patch: But they ultimately didn't get what they wanted.

Schoenberg: Well, they criticized me putting on the breaks on their plan in 2003. ... I had heard from all the surrounding communities how dissatisfied they were with what was about to happen, so I asked IDOT to do an independent quantitative analysis to examine traffic & safety and cost, and their analyses came back and Northfield's plan was inadequate for both counts. ... So I agreed to get \$75,000 in state funds for the [Lakota Group study](#), which involved a public-participation process [between Northfield and Winnetka]. ... If you look at the report, we know

what the outcome is going to be, including how an underpass will connect Willow and Clarkson Park would add significantly to the safety part of the equation.

Patch: In the final draft of the [Lakota Group's Context-Sensitive Enhancement Plan](#), it says a two- or three-lane design between Sunset Ridge Road and the river bridge was ultimately favored over a four-lane plan. [The report's illustrations diverge from the public consensus and propose a four-lane configuration between Sunset Ridge and Wagner.]

Schoenberg: That's based on public comments. Northfield deliberately packed the room with members of the general public at a meeting subsequent to the one where the village's paid lobbyist, Larry Horist, was asked to leave. ... Northfield grossly violated the process by sending a paid lobbyist to influence local residents volunteering their time to make recommendations. It was like trying to influence an impartial jury.

Patch: Describe your relationship with Northfield.

Schoenberg: When John Birkinbine was village president, I consistently offered to help Northfield get state support for dealing with flooding issues. ... I've always offered to intercede on Northfield's behalf to help them deal with that kind of problem.

Patch: And how has that been received?

Schoenberg: What do you think? One of the arguments made around home rule was needing to be able to raise taxes to fight back against the bad guys in Springfield. [Points to himself.] It only won by 240 votes [250, according to the [Cook County Clerk's office](#)], so I think the community was split on the issue of whether or not to switch to home rule so that it was easier to raise taxes to pay for things like the big ticket Willow Road story. I haven't looked at all the documents, but the village has hired some very smart, talented and expensive people to make sure it turns out their way.

Patch: Right, you still haven't collected your FOIA [Freedom of Information Act request]?

Schoenberg: It was expensive. You would have thought that Northfield was trying to eliminate its budget deficit just through one request for all their contracts and billing information. [The village charged the maximum the law allows for reproduction costs, 15 cents per page, which came to \$926.55.] I can't help but think that Attorney General [Lisa] Madigan has other more pressing matters to deal with besides getting Northfield to do their job and provide the information as required by law. ... They gave me a three-page summary of what they had spent up to the point of the [FOIA] request being made. No contracts, no board minutes, no documentation.

Patch: But so when they did come through with this other one, with really everything...

Schoenberg: Right, and they questioned why I was asking for it and wanted to charge me the equivalent of somebody's property taxes to get the information I need to do my job. I'm their senator. I'm the elected public official seeking information about a state road project in my own district. I'm just doing my job.

Patch: So you still haven't seen the documents?

Schoenberg: Well, the attorney general is working through these issues with them. ... The three-page summary showed that the school district and the park district made expenditures for Willow Road public relations services. Did the school and park boards vote to do that? Where did they get the money to do it? I have FOIAed the school district and park district too to find that out.

[Schoenberg later sent us an e-mail, saying he received his request from the Northfield Park District and Sunset Ridge School District 29. "Unlike the Village, they did not seek any fees, nor did they question the validity of my asking for the documentation," he wrote.]

Patch: You sent out a newsletter saying that IDOT had already come to the conclusion about doing the four-lane plan, but IDOT came out and said they hadn't made a decision, so I'm wondering why you're so confident it's going to be four lanes.

Schoenberg: Because the state's already paid for a top-of-the-line, independent context-sensitive design study that maps out how to make that part of Willow Road safer and have the traffic run more smoothly. I don't expect much will change from the Lakota Group's findings.

Patch: Then why even have this new committee?

Schoenberg: The citizen input is always very important and you can't really work towards building consensus without it. So I think there's great value to what's going on now as they're traveling along the same path as what resulted in the Lakota Group's excellent work.

This interview has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.

Voice your opinion at the next Willow Road Community Advisory Group meeting, Nov. 18, 6-9 p.m., at New Trier High School.

[A Northfield Parent](#)
[3:28pm on Tuesday, November 16, 2010](#)

In regards to child safety, where exactly is the pedestrian and bike safety in the Senator's decreed 4 lane plan? (BTW, Appropriations Czar Schoenberg wasted \$2 Million of tax payer money on Tennessee based consultants to plan 4 & 5 lane highways only, not find a solution.) The great, child safe underpass between Clarkson & Willow Parks? Did the Senator actually research that specific location? It's in a flood zone, at the far East end of School District 29. Unfortunately 90% of the district's students live nowhere near the proposed underpass location and won't use it. Plus, both parks flood extensively, so will the Senator Schoenberg Underpass will make a better pond. Better, budget in swimming lessons!

The Senator FIOA'ed the School Board, Park Board & Village not caring that His crusade has taken thinly staffed public employees away from their jobs for the better part of two weeks. The Village, School Board & Park Board's don't get reimbursed for that wasted employee time, so quit bellyaching and pay the legally allowed copy fees! In regards to no complaints from the School Board or Park Boards, the Senator did get a letter from the school board protesting that his crusade took educators away from teaching!