

Advisory group members take issue with new Willow Road report

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State officials are pointing to accident and traffic studies as evidence that the two-lane stretch of Willow Road in Northfield needs widening.

But some in Northfield questioned those statistics and argued that they had not been given adequate time to review new numbers before a heated July 15 meeting.

A 25-member "Community Advisory Group," or CAG, has been tasked with providing input as the state considers its options for widening Willow Road. The membership is made up of residents, leaders and business-owners from Northfield (which has a majority of the membership), Glenview, Northbrook and Winnetka.

The meetings are hosted by the Illinois Department of Transportation.

Opinions about Willow Road are split and very strong -- many in Northfield argue that lanes should be limited to three for safety sake, and residents and businesses in Glenview and Northbrook say a wider road would alleviate regional traffic jams.

The debate is decades old, and the current IDOT study is not the first.

In fact, similar plans and studies have been scrapped. A joint Winnetka-Northfield study nearly three years ago yielded inconclusive results. Construction for a plan to widen the road to three lanes had been set to begin in 2005.

IDOT referred to statistics that showed that between 2006 and 2008, injury accidents resulting from rear-ending and side-swiping on Willow Road were triple the state average.

During that time, 639 total accidents were reported -- 454 of which involved a car rear-ending another, said Chuck Stenzel, of the TranSystems consulting firm. The study assessed the road from Waukegan Road to the Edens Expressway.

Of those accidents, 115 involved injuries.

Stenzel cited bumper-to-bumper traffic, a lack of turn lanes and driver error as primary reasons for the accidents. He said the accidents typically occurred during weekday afternoons when conditions were dry.

Bob Hayward, of Northfield, said the numbers showed that the most dangerous spots were in the outlying wider areas -- not the two-lane section under consideration.

The study showed many of the accidents were near the Edens Expressway or west of Sunset Ridge Road.

"These accidents are happening predominantly where the road is five, six, seven lanes wide," Hayward said.

Other CAG members said the accidents were the direct result of bottlenecks on either side of the two-lane stretch of Willow Road in Northfield.

Some group members questioned the stats entirely, arguing that they were not given adequate time to review the 566-page report.

"This is what we got," said Northfield Village Manager Stacy Sigman, who held up a thick stack of IDOT paperwork. "We were promised it a month ago. We got it a few days ago."

Scott Turban, of Northfield, said the stack of data was "overwhelming" and that the CAG was limited to the interpretations of others who had more time to review the numbers.

"There are a lot of conclusions that one can reach," he said.

Northfield representatives asked that IDOT allow for more time to review the reports.

IDOT -- which said members would have plenty of opportunities to weigh in later -- did not agree, and neither did some CAG members.

Winnetka resident Jeffery Liss noted that while members were required to submit initial input by Aug. 10, they would have time to add to or amend their comments afterward.

"I don't see why everything has to stop," Liss said.

The meeting became heated at times, with frequent eruptions of shouting. "Don't interrupt me" became a mantra for members scrambling to make their points before someone else could chime in.

Arguments over expertise or suspected motives overwhelmed discussions and inquiries.

The hot tempers weren't limited to the CAG. Some audience members mumbled their disgust -- whether it be issue-related or about the debate itself -- while others became openly hostile.

"Who's running the meeting here!" shouted one woman, as the CAG members argued about whether the meeting should have been rescheduled.