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School speed zone nixed for Willow Road through Northfield

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The Illinois Department of Transportation has turned down a request from Northfield officials to establish a reduced school speed zone of 20 mph along Willow Road through the village.

The 1.2-mile stretch of state-controlled Willow Road through Northfield contains three schools -- Middlefork Elementary School, Sunset Ridge School and Northfield Community Nursery School -- as well as parks, churches and a community center, wrote Sunset Ridge School Board President Phoebe Raymond, Police Chief Bill Lustig and Village President Fred Gougler in a June 24 letter requesting the designation.

School zones "force drivers to be more alert at intersections and require them to reduce their speed and hang up their cell phones," the letter stated. "This would be an important first step for securing our children's safety."

But IDOT found a 20 mph school zone is not warranted on Willow Road. The roadway has stop light-controlled crossings for the schools, the school properties are surrounded by fences and sidewalks are sufficiently removed from the highway, Diane O'Keefe, IDOT's deputy director of highways, stated.

"Enforcement may still serve as a deterrent even if this portion of Willow Road does not carry the school speed limit designation," O'Keefe wrote in a Nov. 16 letter. "Local police may choose to have a lower tolerance for violations within this area, which could influence motorist behavior."

The rejection letter was received shortly before the Nov. 18 meeting of IDOT's Community Advisory Group, comprised of representatives from Northfield, Winnetka, Glenview and Northbrook. The group was assembled by IDOT last year to deal with decades-old disagreements between the communities over whether the two-lane stretch of Willow Road should be widened through Northfield.

At the meeting, Northfield representatives demanded that IDOT provide data from established school crossings statewide, not just the 600 in the six-county metropolitan Chicago area, to determine whether school zone designation standards have been uniformly applied.

IDOT representatives presented a number of other techniques that could make crossing Willow Road safer, such as warning signs, pavement markings and numerical displays that let pedestrians know when the seconds until the crossing period ends.

"The overall goal is to have a permanent, long-term, sustainable safety solution along the road," IDOT's project management consultant said.

The group continued to battle over data -- in traffic analysis reports and even a list of the roadway's physical condition -- and remained divided over how to deal with the roadway's future.

Northfield representatives maintain a wider road would pose safety problems, while those of neighboring communities believe the bottleneck has contributed to regional traffic flow problems.

Northfield treats the Edens Expressway's Willow Road interchange "as their private entrance and the heck with 122,000 people in surrounding suburbs," charged Andy Kurz of Glenview, one of several residents commenting at the meeting. "You want to talk about safety? You want to talk about crashes? Enlarge your 1.2-mile stretch and look at the surrounding areas. You're going to see there's road rage, there's frustration."

When the Community Advisory Group next meets Jan. 20, plans are to discuss alternate ways to improve traffic patterns other than widening Northfield's portion of Willow Road.

Those costly alternatives include adding or modifying interchanges to the Tri-State Tollway or Edens Expressway at Dundee Road, Tower Road and Lake Avenue.

The group has now met six times in the first year of what moderator Peter Harmet, IDOT's bureau chief of programming, said will be a two-year process to find an alternative that addresses the area's mobility, safety and transportation needs.

Bob Hayward, a Northfield representative and chairman of Northfield's Traffic and Transportation Committee, has little faith in the process.

"We're halfway through wasting a whole lot of taxpayers' dollars...and we haven't reached consensus on anything," he said.

A Winnetka resident who commented called it "paralysis by analysis."

But Harmet believes the cumulative process will work, unlike earlier scratched plans that would have widened the road to three lanes.

"What has been missing in past efforts has been a comprehensive effort to put every single issue on the table," Harmet said. "What are the things you have to do to address the mobility issues? What are all the things you have to do to address the safety issues? Those have been in separate discussions in separate places. This brings it all together."