

IDOT to host next Willow Road meeting March 4; community group opts for 3-lane plan

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The Willow Road debate is continuing to spark community interest as the Illinois Department of Transportation is getting ready to host another public meeting.

The meeting will take place from 4:30 to 7:30 p.m. Thursday, March 4 at the Renaissance Hotel, 933 Skokie Blvd., in Northbrook.

IDOT has hosted meetings in the Northern suburbs regarding its plans for the road that runs through Northfield and Glenview and continues west. IDOT is looking to widen a 1.2-mile stretch of the road, which is mostly two lanes, in Northfield, to four lanes, and in some places, to five lanes.

In Sept. 2009, IDOT announced it would start over in its planning process for the road. It had previously proposed both a three-lane option and four-lane option.

Pete Harmot, bureau chief of programming for IDOT, said that the department is in the "fairly early" stages of the planning process. So, the purpose of the meeting is to obtain further public input regarding transportation needs.

"We're trying to define those based on the people who use the route and live along the route," Harmot said.

He said that IDOT hopes to have "a very thorough understanding of the transportation needs from the perspective of stakeholders," and the department is continuing to analyze congestion and safety.

Harmot said the meeting will include displays of information that IDOT has gathered to date from its Community Awareness Group meetings, which took place Nov. 5 and Jan. 14. The CAG formed in fall 2009 and is made up of 25 individuals from Northfield, Glenview, Northbrook and Winnetka.

IDOT will also present its overall planning process at the meeting. The meeting will be an open house format, and residents are welcome to come and go during the meeting hours. IDOT will provide an opportunity for attendees to share comments and questions, and officials will be present.

Harmot said IDOT plans to have a preferred plan by spring 2011.

The North Suburban Awareness Group, a citizen-led nonprofit organization made up of residents concerned about possible plans for Willow Road, has recently launched a Web in order to spread awareness of its stance and about the future of the road, at www.northsuburbanawarenessgroup.org.

The group opposes IDOT's plan, and residents have expressed concern about the proposal, especially since the thoroughfare runs next to several schools.

Bob Hayward is a Northfield resident and member of the NSAG. He lives on the south side of Willow Road, and his children cross the street to attend school and get to parks and friends' homes.

Hayward believes what IDOT is proposing is an "illogical and reckless" plan.

Along Willow Road are three schools, three churches and multiple parks, he said.

"A three-lane plan maintains safety of that road and its surroundings," Hayward said. "And that is what we should be putting our time into right now."

IDOT threw out the three-lane plan in 2005.

NSAG is also concerned about the project's delay and continued cost to taxpayers. The group is also taking issue with the way that IDOT has been conducting business throughout the information-gathering and planning processes. IDOT has hosted Community Advisory Group meetings but, Hayward, who is a member of the CAG, said, the minutes taken from those events have not accurately reflected what has gone on during those events.

"There have been a lot of unresolved issues," Harmot said. "There's been a lot of history and strong feelings. This planning process has been structured to put all those issues on the table and look at a variety of alternatives and look at the plusses and minuses of all of them to come up with a solution."

IDOT's Web site with information about Willow Road is www.willowroadfuture.org. The IDOT site does not back a specific lane-number plan. IDOT will host another CAG meeting in April.

-Kimberly Reishus, triblocal.com reporter