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**Northfield questions Willow Road study data
Village points to signals, three-lane plan as possible solutions; residents
voice opposition to widening**

by Laura Michaels

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More questions were raised last week about the future of Willow Road and the potential need for additional lanes to alleviate traffic congestion.

The fifth in a series of Community Advisory Group meetings was held Wednesday, Sept. 15, at New Trier High School's Northfield campus to review traffic and crash studies conducted by transportation consulting group TranSystems.

Hired by the Illinois Department of Transportation, TranSystems analyzed the number and type of crashes – along with traffic data – on the 1.2-mile stretch of Willow Road between Waukegan Road and the Interstate 94 interchange in Northfield being considered for possible expansion. During the three-year study period – from 2006 to 2008 – 639 crashes were observed, with two being Type A severe injury crashes. Rear-end collisions made up 71 percent of the crashes in the study area.

And while TranSystems and IDOT officials contend congestion is responsible for most of the accidents, a review of the studies by a Village of Northfield-hired traffic engineering firm indicated most of the accidents were due to driver error or inattentive drivers.

"[Kenig, Lindgren, O'Hara, Aboona Inc.] gave a completely unbiased evaluation of the data," Northfield Village Manager Stacy Sigman said in an interview after the meeting. "The data shows our roadway is functioning exceedingly well."

IDOT officials, on the other hand, pointed to the crashes as evidence the road is over capacity.

"The bottom line is the road is over capacity," said Pete Harmet, IDOT's bureau chief of programming. "Existing conditions are congested and anything over that will cause further congestion."

Sigman said during the meeting that many of the road's problems could be solved with technological upgrades, including modernized, interconnected traffic signals, and left turn lanes. She also questioned IDOT's projected 2030 numbers, which had traffic on Willow increasing by 14 percent. KLOA studied traffic

volumes on all of the area's major east-west corridors over the past 20 years and found, with the exception of the Eden's Spur, all roads saw either a decline or no increase in traffic. Sigman said this was evidence that the projected 2030 increase might be incorrect.

"You can't just look at the last three years of data," she said.

Tempers flared at the meeting when Northfield resident and CAG member Bob Hayward called the reports from TranSystems "inaccurate and misleading," and said IDOT has not listened to residents' concerns.

"You're neglecting us on purpose and the buck must stop now," Hayward said.

Harmet, however, said nothing in the reports was misleading or inaccurate, but acknowledged Northfield officials raised questions IDOT will address.

While some Northfield residents believe IDOT favors widening Willow to four or five lanes, Harmet maintained all the alternatives would be identified and explored before the project moves forward.

"We're going to study proposed solutions ... but first we have to identify traffic needs," he said. "We haven't even gotten to alternatives yet."

Sigman said the Village of Northfield has been advocating for a wider, three-lane road for years, and while the roadway was scheduled for construction in 2005, "the project just kind of got stopped."

"I have never had a direct answer for why the three-lane plan was scrapped," Sigman said.

During the CAG meeting several Northfield residents came forward to voice their concern for protecting not only the character of the community – which they feel would be jeopardized with the additional traffic more lanes would bring – but also the community's children. Schools, parks and churches flank the section of Willow under review.

"I feel that the safety of the road and the character of Northfield is much more important [than widening the road]," one resident said. "Leave us alone and let us keep the character of our town."

Several CAG and community members also brought up the need for a school zone near the intersection of Willow and Wagner roads.

"We've waited long enough, we need a school zone on Willow Road," said Sunset Ridge District 29 Superintendent Linda Vieth. Both of the district's schools

are located near Willow, with Middlefork School sitting just behind the Northfield Community Center at Willow and Wagner.

"We can't take any more chances, we must have a school zone," Vieth said.

Harmet said IDOT will "carefully consider the school zone request," and should have an answer in the coming weeks.

The next advisory group meeting is scheduled for Nov. 18, from 6-8 p.m. at New Trier's Northfield campus, 7 Happ Road. More information on the process and summaries of past meetings can be found at www.willowroadfuture.org.