

## **Northfield residents differ from neighboring communities on what they want for Willow Road**

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Residents of Northfield and neighboring communities are clashing on whether Willow Road should be a regional thoroughfare or a local street.

In Northfield, residents want to keep Willow from expanding beyond three lanes, citing child safety concerns around adjacent schools and parks.

Glenview resident John Nicolau said his Northfield neighbors have a “cake and eat it too” mentality, citing increased development and commerce in the village --- such as Kraft Foods, car dealerships, Dominick’s and Starbucks.

He said the road infrastructure must increase to meet those interests’ transportation demands.

“This is not a local road. It’s a regional road,” Nicolau said, echoing comments from other Glenview, Winnetka and Northbrook residents.

He acknowledged Northfield residents’ concerns about child safety, but said that increased traffic in his neighborhood from cars hoping to avoid the Willow Road bottleneck was putting his children in jeopardy, too.

His comments came during an Illinois Department of Transportation-hosted Community Advisory Group meeting Wednesday night, part of a two-year study on the possible expansion of Willow Road through Northfield.

Northfield’s Village Manager Stacy Sigman, also a member of the Advisory Group, stressed Willow Road’s safety as a two-lane street. She supports expanding it to no more than three lanes.

Sigman cited both IDOT’s statistics and those from a village-funded engineering firm, KLOA, which show no fatal traffic accidents over a three-year span, and relatively few accidents that resulted in injury.

“The most dangerous part of the existing roadway is the six-lane intersection at Willow and Waukegan (roads),” Sigman said.

Sigman said accidents are not a significant problem, and congestion isn’t due to the road narrowing to two lanes over a 1.2-mile stretch in Northfield.

“The problems along the corridor are because there are outdated traffic signals, poorly timed intersections and insufficient left-turn lanes,” Sigman said.

Pete Harmet, IDOT Bureau Chief of Programming and chair of the Advisory Group, questioned Sigman’s philosophy.

“The response seems to be, ‘Well, it could have been a lot worse, so let’s ignore what did happen.’ ... The bottom line is there are three injury crashes per month,” Harmet said.

Glenview Village President Kerry Cummings said before the meeting that her town considers Willow Road’s expansion “a top policy priority” because “traffic congestion, capacity and safety concerns along Willow Road are issues of critical importance to everyone.”

Willow’s configuration causes traffic to spill over onto side streets in Glenview, Northfield, Northbrook and Winnetka to avoid a bottleneck, she said.

“Those roads aren’t designed or equipped to handle that volume of traffic, and that puts residents and kids along those roads at risk,” Cummings said.

Advisory Group member Bob Hayward, a Northfield resident and chair of the village’s traffic and transportation committee, led the verbal assault – questioning IDOT’s statistics and motives.

After another member noted that certain figures from a 600-page report’s narrative didn’t match up a corresponding table, IDOT admitted that the wrong table had been used.

Hayward exploded with rage.

“It’s malfeasance!” he shouted, saying the mistake put the entire contents of the report into question.

Harmet tried to quiet Hayward down, explaining that the correct numbers were used in the report’s text.

“The analysis is correct,” Harmet said.

Later, during a report on Willow Road’s physical infrastructure problems – the pavement is more than 60 years old and doesn’t have a curved surface to allow proper drainage – Hayward assailed IDOT for not addressing safety concerns.

“You’re leaving out the important things,” he said. “You are misleading the public.”

Harmet said the report was specifically on the roadway's physical properties, and that safety concerns are addressed in a separate report.

"You're trying to make this report out into something it's not," Harmet said, never making eye contact with Hayward, seated directly to his right.

During a report discussing the road project's purpose and need, Hayward questioned whether the two-year Advisory Group's discussion would have any impact on the future project. Hayward noted that each discussion was ended before agreement could be made by group members.

Harmet said a consensus may not be reached on all items.

"You're not even trying to reach a consensus," he said, calling the process, "smoke and mirrors."

That fed a conversation about a recent newsletter from State Sen. Jeff Schoenberg, D-Evanston, which implied a decision had already been made to expand Willow Road into four lanes.

During a public comment session, Harmet addressed residents' concerns.

"We haven't made any decision," Harmet said. "We haven't even talked about alternatives. I don't have a comment on the newsletter."

Some Northfield residents are taking the opportunity to address IDOT on a related subject – a school traffic zone along Willow.

Linda Vieth, superintendent of Sunset Ridge School District 29 in Northfield, whose schools are both near Willow Road, made an impassioned plea to IDOT to install traffic zones to lower speed limits.

"Here in Northfield we have been so blessed that we haven't had a child killed crossing Willow Road," Vieth said. Two crossing guards, however, have been hit in recent years, she said.

But when she worked at a school district further west, a young boy was killed crossing the street. Vieth teared up describing the district's mourning.

"I can't imagine how that boy's family felt," Vieth said.

She said District 29 has been around for 85 years, but never had a school speed zone on Willow Road.

"It is time," she said. "We've waited long enough."