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Northfield's next stop for Willow Road is unclear

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Northfield could look at Lincolnshire as an example of how a scuffle with the state over the widening of Willow Road could play out.

Lincolnshire fought a similar battle with the Illinois Department of Transportation almost a decade ago, spending upwards of \$1 million to oppose the expansion of Route 22 from two lanes to four lanes. The end result: IDOT won, and the road was widened.

Northfield has not announced any plans to fight the state by legal means, but many residents and village officials oppose the IDOT initiative. IDOT said April 15 it would commence a \$4 million engineering study in July to widen Willow Road in Northfield to four lanes.

Lincolnshire's Willow

In March 2001, IDOT announced it would expand Route 22, or Half Day Road, in Lincolnshire. Like Northfield, Lincolnshire objected on the grounds of safety and lack of local consensus.

Both Willow Road and Route 22 run through residential areas, and Willow borders schools.

Later that year, Lincolnshire hired a public relations firm to lobby against the expansion and sued IDOT to force it to study the impact of widening the road, as well as alternatives.

After years of back-and-forth arguing between state and local officials, the village was unable to prevent IDOT from widening the road to four lanes, although it managed a few compromises, such as a lowered speed limit.

The widening project was completed in 2004.

Whether resisting IDOT was worth the effort or should be mimicked in Northfield -- is up for debate.

Lincolnshire Trustee David Saltiel, who was not a trustee at the time, advised against fighting the state if Northfield is the only village on board. Lincolnshire learned that the hard way.

"It became very clear, very early, that IDOT was not going to back off, they were not going to give up, and we didn't have the support of neighboring communities," he said. "Bottom line, we were going to lose."

It didn't pay off in Lincolnshire, and Saltiel said he doubts it would in Northfield.

"The result was, we actually got a road that was probably worse than we would have gotten if we had settled up," he said.

Lincolnshire Mayor Brett Blomberg, who was a trustee at the time, gave a more optimistic view of the outcome.

He said he was pleased with the result of the village's struggle with IDOT. The costly legal action, he said, made a difference.

"Absolutely, it was worth it," he said.

Although the road was widened in the end, Blomberg said the village's efforts prevented the state from constructing an 18-foot-wide median.

"We argued for something smaller, and we ended up where we knew we would end up eventually," he said.

The compromise also left private property and the village's adjacent bike paths intact, he said.

"This has worked out very well," Blomberg said. "We have a good relationship with IDOT, and things have moved along nicely."

Parallels in Northfield

The situation in Northfield has not escalated to the level it did in Lincolnshire, but the arguments are similar.

In 1999, Northfield and IDOT agreed to a plan that would increase Willow Road to three lanes. The plan was later postponed and eventually nixed.

Northfield officials continued to argue that the three-lane solution would better address traffic flow and safety, but IDOT -- with the support of Glenview and Northbrook -- wanted four lanes.

Village Manager Stacy Sigman said that Northfield will sit tight until more specific plans are provided. IDOT has only announced the engineering study and has not offered any renderings of how the road would be structured.

"We don't know what we'll get," Sigman said.

In the meantime, Northfield has continued a \$90,000 state-funded study of the road. The study -- which was not complete at the time of the IDOT announcement -- is being conducted by a committee made up of Northfield and Winnetka residents.

The study was intended to consider resident concerns regarding the road and brainstorm possible solutions.

"We're just moving ahead with that, and then we'll determine how we'll move forward," Sigman said.



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