

chicagotribune.com

Northfield officials stunned by state's Willow Road widening plan

Engineering studies to start this summer

By Courtney Flynn

Tribune reporter

April 16, 2008

State leaders shocked Northfield officials Tuesday by announcing they plan to widen Willow Road to four lanes, a move that would decide the fate of the 1.2-mile stretch of road through the North Shore suburb after decades of debate.

Spurred by state Sen. Jeff Schoenberg (D-Evanston), the Illinois Department of Transportation this summer will embark on \$4 million worth of engineering studies for the eventual widening of the road, officials said.

"We are breaking a 40-year impasse over questions of traffic safety and expanded capacity for Willow Road," Schoenberg said at a news conference at the North Shore Senior Center in Northfield. "We're moving forward and putting an end to the posturing and paradox so that this important regional roadway can adequately serve the overwhelming majority of those traveling throughout the North Shore."

But the announcement frustrated Northfield Village President John Birkinbine, who said Northfield and Winnetka were in the final stages of resolving some safety issues that could affect Willow's configuration.

"Frankly, I knew nothing about the engineering studies, and I find it fascinating they hold a press conference in Northfield without any Northfield governmental officials there," Birkinbine said. "We have been told one thing only to have something else happen with regard to Willow Road before."

Willow, which narrows from four lanes to two through Northfield, often irritates drivers stuck in traffic.

Neighboring Glenview and Northbrook have invested heavily in economic development along Willow and have argued it is a regional road with a bottleneck preventing customers from accessing their retail base.

But Northfield officials contend widening the road to four lanes would be unsafe for schoolchildren crossing the busy street.

At Schoenberg's prodding, Northfield and Winnetka teamed up last year and hired The Lakota Group to draft a plan for Willow as it runs through both towns.

Birkinbine characterized the process as a "good collaborative effort" between Winnetka and Northfield. A May 1 meeting likely was to be the last to iron out safety concerns over the road that includes intersections near two elementary schools in Northfield, he said.

"[Most] of the participants involved in the Lakota study did not want four lanes," Birkinbine said. "It's a slap in the face to the citizens who turned out and were told that they were being asked for their thoughts on what they wanted done with the road."

But Schoenberg said the eight-member committee charged with studying Willow's future was deadlocked on the widening issue.

"Someone needed to step forward and break the tie," Schoenberg said. "There were too many stalling tactics at work that resembled what we've seen over the past 40 years."

He said the Lakota study already was 20 percent over budget at more than \$90,000 and four months behind schedule.

State officials maintain that careful attention will be paid to safety in the new road design. An underpass is planned between Willow Park and Clarkson Park to allow children to cross the road safely, Schoenberg said. There also would be sidewalks and bike lanes added, he said.

The engineering studies could take about four years and construction would take about another year and a half, said Diane O'Keefe, IDOT deputy director of highways.

Birkinbine said he feels that the hundreds of hours of work he and others have put into studying the issue may now be meaningless.

"This calls into question whether we should even finish the Lakota study, which the senator encouraged," Birkinbine said. "If they're about to spend \$4 million of the people's money on engineering studies, it makes it sound like the outcome is moot."

Winnetka Village President Ed Woodbury said he understood Birkinbine's disappointment but that the safety concerns raised during the Lakota study will not go to waste.

"I'm not dismissing Northfield's comments, but at the end of the day, the most we could hope for was that the state didn't discard our ideas," Woodbury said.

Schoenberg said the group's work is important and will be the driving force behind the engineering studies.

"There will always be some who are resistant," Schoenberg said.

"The overwhelming majority of people who live and work in these communities will be thrilled with this outcome."

cflynn@tribune.com

Copyright © 2008, [Chicago Tribune](#)