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## Ongoing Willow Road study frustrates locals

By Jeff Danna / TribLocal reporter



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Cars pass a sign on Willow Road in Northfield calling for a three-lane solution to traffic issues on the road.

Some Northfield residents think state transit officials are trying to ram through a plan to widen Willow Road, which could heavily increase traffic in their community.

They worry the state has bigger plans for the project than previously discussed, and worry their town could become a well-traveled bypass for traffic attempting to reach O'Hare International Airport on Interstate Highway 294.

Tempers flared at recent meeting between of Illinois Department of Transportation representatives and members of a community group, said Northfield residents.

Some members of the group accused the IDOT representatives of withholding information about the project until the last minute, leaving little time for them to read through the data.

“All we want to do is be able to have time to prepare for the meeting, ask questions, and challenge assumptions,” said Bob Hayward, a Northfield resident who is member of the advisory group.

Although Willow Road won't widen in Glenview and Northbrook, the project could affect traffic flow in those communities. Many residents in the neighboring towns are keeping an eye on the talks, but people in Northfield say they'll feel the brunt of the project.

Hayward said IDOT agreed to provide Willow Road data a month in advance, but advisory group members were hit with a 566-page document just four days before the July 15 meeting.

Pete Harmet, the lead project manager for Willow Road, acknowledged the lateness of the document, but said the reason was not nefarious.

“The report just took longer to complete than anticipated,” he said.

Representatives from IDOT and the agency's consultant, TransSystems, presented an overview of the study to the Northfield group, and Harmet said residents can submit questions and comments about the study to IDOT by Aug. 10.

Agency representatives would carve out time in the September meeting's agenda to address those comments, Harmet said.

But residents aren't buying Harmet's pledge.

"They said, 'Send us your comments by Aug. 10'; it's not even clear what they're going to do with our comments," said advisory group member Ted Greene, a Northfield resident and former village trustee.

Plans to widen Willow Road date back years — Harmet said he's heard that they were discussed in the 1970s.

About a decade ago, residents, agency officials, and state lawmakers were close to an agreement, Northfield residents said.

After discussions about four- and five-lane projects, those involved in the discussions reached a compromise: The road would be widened to three lanes, residents said. But the compromise fell through the cracks during the legislative process.

"It didn't get to the point where everything got far enough to go to construction," Harmet said.

Harmet was reluctant to say the agency ever agreed to a three-lane solution, reasoning those discussions were long ago and not final. However, he did acknowledge that the process returned to square one last year when IDOT representatives began Phase 1 of their Willow Road study, which includes community meetings, Harmet said.

A state law passed in 2005 requires the agency to explore "context sensitive solutions" — which has increased public involvement as a component.

"We've been doing exactly that in this process," Harmet said.

Residents disagree. While Harmet said IDOT has not put forward any specific plans for re-engineering Willow Road between Waukegan Road and the Edens Expressway, residents accuse IDOT of favoring the four- and five-lane solutions proposed a decade ago.

Hayward looks at the intersection of Willow and Pfingsten roads about three miles west of Northfield as the future of Willow Road in his community — wide, congested, and unfriendly to pedestrians.

"That is exactly the type of road character IDOT wants in Northfield," Hayward said.

Such a project could be dangerous for Northfield children walking across Willow Road to school, he added.

He and other residents favor a regional traffic plan for easing congestions. Traffic is heavy on Willow Road, they say, because drivers lack options for traveling between the Tri-State Tollway and the Edens Expressway.

“The Edens Spur is incomplete,” Hayward said, explaining that drivers can take it toward Wisconsin but not toward O’Hare International Airport.

Instead, motorists use surface streets, particularly Willow Road, due a lack of interchanges on the Tri-State, he said.

Harmet said IDOT would eventually study the expressway interchanges, but the focus is now on Willow Road.

And Northfield residents think that as long as the priority is re-engineering their Main Street, their community will suffer.

“We won’t come to a three-lane conclusion through this process,” Greene said. “You really feel like the little guy.”