

## **IDOT reverses its decision to resurface Willow Road for now**

<http://www.pioneerlocal.com/winnetka/news/407245.wn-willow-53107-s1.article>

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By **JOANNA BRODER** Staff Writer

Residents of Northfield anxious for some news on the widening and resurfacing of Willow Road, may relate to Bob Dylan's lyrics: "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind."

In just a few weeks, the Illinois Department of Transportation has reversed its decision to resurface Willow Road -- from Sunset Ridge Road to the Eden's Expressway in Northfield, and from the Eden's Expressway to Michigan Boulevard in Winnetka (just east of the Willow Road Dam).

The decision happened after the villages of Northfield and Winnetka decided May 15 to hire planning firm, the Lakota Group, to perform a study of Willow Road. At a cost of \$72,075, the group will examine how Willow Road flows through Northfield and Winnetka, and try to find the best ways to balance regional transportation needs with the specific needs of the villages, said Stacy Sigman, Northfield's Village Manager. The Lakota Group study will encompass Willow Road from Waukegan Road in Northfield to Provident Street in Winnetka.

This is the second time in the last six months that the Illinois Department of Transportation has changed its mind about resurfacing Willow Road. In December, Diane O'Keefe, deputy director for highways region one at the Illinois Department of Transportation, declined Northfield's request to resurface Willow Road. Then in early May, she reversed that decision noting in a telephone interview with the Pioneer Press that the Department would indeed resurface Willow Road because of "a very severe winter with a lot of freeze cycles."

But in a May 21st conference call with the villages of Winnetka and Northfield, O'Keefe flip flopped again, telling the Villages of Northfield and Winnetka that she is no longer comfortable going forward with the resurfacing while the Lakota Group study is ongoing.

The scope of the upcoming Lakota Group study will involve a good deal of interaction with the community, O'Keefe said. "About the worst time to have such a study going on is when you have any type of construction going on," she said in a voice message, noting that she did not want the construction to impact the way people feel about the Willow Road issue.

O'Keefe said the Department will go ahead with resurfacing Willow Road after the Lakota Group completes its study before the end of the year.

"We didn't get notice of the resurfacing, and they didn't get notice of the Lakota Group," Sigman said. Such notices "did sort of cross in the mail."

Northfield has spent years wrangling with the state and neighboring villages of Glenview, Northbrook and Winnetka about the best ways to widen a six-tenths of a mile stretch of Willow Road, beginning at the bridge over the Chicago River near Bess Hardware and ending just west of the intersection of Sunset Ridge Road and Willow Road. In that stretch, Willow Road moves from being four lanes (two in each direction) to two lanes (one in each direction).

Willow Road there has backups during rush hour when cars driving on the one-lane road need to turn off onto side streets, Sigman said. But, without any clear strategy to widen the road from the department of transportation, some Northfield residents are concerned that a future plan may present a safety hazard to the town's school children. They must cross Willow Road to get to Northfield's two schools, Middlefork Elementary School and Sunset Ridge Middle School.

## New Advocacy Group

In response to such concerns, a relatively new citizen group, the Northfield Community Action Group, formed last fall. The group, which has about 30 core members, held a meeting on May 22 to educate Northfield residents about the history of Willow Road. It also hoped to create a residential army of sorts, said its president Ted Greene. That way, a large group of Northfield residents could be available on a moment's notice to show up en masse for meetings with the department of transportation.

"Really, at the end of the day, we need to effect the political process in the state," Greene told the approximately 100 residents who attended the meeting. For every one Glenview resident who attends a meeting with the department of transportation "we need three," he said.

"I thought they did a good job of sort of educating the people who were there on the sort of long history of what happened, and maybe where we're headed in the future," said Sigman, who answered questions at the evening meeting held in the gymnasium of Middlefork School.

Greene said that the group's main goal is to get residents to volunteer their time. The group has already received about \$40,000 from its core members to launch educational campaigns. In the future, it may hire experts, such as engineers, to conduct additional studies of Willow Road, Greene said. About 20 residents signed up to serve on committees after the meeting, according to Greene.

Northfield resident Patrick McCarthy attended the meeting out of concern for the town's children. Now when he crosses Willow Road with his five-year-old, "we barely get across the little road to get over here to the park," he said. "If they widen that with two or four more lanes, I can only imagine the difficulty crossing the street."

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