

NORTHFIELD, Ill., April 16 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The unilateral decision to begin spending money on the expansion of Willow Road violates state rules and could set the stage for legal action and further conflict on this long-contentious issue, Northfield Village President John L. Birkinbine warned today.

"We are committed to continuing the collaborative process that now has been short circuited by Senator Jeff Schoenberg's announcement that Willow Road would be expanded to four lanes," said Birkinbine. "But everyone should be aware that IDOT, by following the Senator's directives, is in violation of its own rules for a Context Sensitive Solution."

"We have never been opposed to improving Willow Road but we think that there are better ways than the standard pave-it-over solution. The reason Willow Road is in such bad shape today isn't because we have been stonewalling. We have negotiated, compromised and agreed to an earlier solution that would have widened Willow Road to three lanes but that was taken off the table by Schoenberg in response to demands by special interests," he said.

In recognition of the importance of the those rules, Birkinbine said Northfield representatives plan to attend two scheduled meetings -- May 1 and 5 -- with the Willow Road Steering Committee to try to iron out the remaining disagreements on the safest, most environmentally friendly and effective plan for solving these long-standing traffic problems.

"Contrary to the impression that the committee's work supports the four-lane option, it is clear to anyone who has attended the committee meetings that it has not yet come to any conclusions regarding the best alternative. No vote has been taken and no consensus has yet been reached. There is no 'done deal,'" Birkinbine said. "IDOT and Schoenberg themselves have not just signed on to this process, they helped initiate it. We intend to see it through. The process isn't over yet."

The committee, composed of Northfield and Winnetka representatives and joined by the Chicago-based Lakota Group, was created to get local input. Birkinbine noted that 90 percent of the citizens who participated in the year long process, to which all citizens and public officials had been invited, indicated a strong desire for a three-lane roadway, rather than four.

The three-lane configuration (which includes center lanes and turning bays to reduce tie-ups at conflict points) is an increasingly preferred and progressive solution. Traffic engineers have noted that it is so successful as a safe, environmentally friendly and effective answer that some jurisdictions, including villages that border Northfield, have started to convert their four-lane undivided highways into the new three-lane format.

"Northfield always has been a proactive advocate for Willow Road, especially over the last decade," said Birkinbine. In an effort to quickly move the process along, Northfield spearheaded the effort when an agreement on the widening of the road was reached in 1998. That project was ready for bid when the state decided at the eleventh hour in 2005 not to fund it.

"Nonetheless, since then we gladly have been at the table, working to develop a solution that works for the region while protecting the safety of our children, the character of our community, sensitive environmental issues, parks and open space and the right of our community to have a say in the shaping of our future.

"Anyone who suggests that we haven't worked hard to reach a meaningful solution is simply unaware of the facts," Birkinbine said.

Moving ahead with four lanes without allowing the study to be completed and the solution presented to the two village boards "violates the spirit and the letter of the Context Sensitive legislation adopted by the state," he explained. He pointed to these provisions in IDOT's own rules: "Through early, frequent and meaningful communication with stakeholders, and a flexible and creative [emphasis added] approach to design, the resulting projects should improve safety and mobility for the traveling public while seeking to preserve and enhance the scenic, economic, historic and natural qualities of the setting through which they pass.

"Context, as it applies to transportation projects can be defined as all elements related to the people and place where a project is located ... [The process should lead to plans and designs that] 'fit' into their surroundings."

Birkinbine said the larger solution has to be more than redoing a 1.2-mile stretch of road in Northfield. "If the state truly wants to improve congestion in the region they need to look at the regional roadway network." A four-lane widening over a short distance is short-sighted," he said. "We would hope that the growing commercial and development interests west Northfield, as well as the villages of Northbrook and Glenview that support them, would recognize the need for a more comprehensive, thoughtful solution."

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