

Schoenberg newsletter irks critics of Willow Road widening project

(<http://www.pioneerlocal.com/winnetka/news/2682342.winnetka-willow-090910-s1.article>)

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A newsletter suggesting that a four-lane Willow Road is a done deal has angered some Northfield residents, who argue that state officials have already made up their minds, despite ongoing talks with locals.

The fall newsletter, released by the office of Sen. Jeff Schoenberg, D-9th, said the Willow Road project is in an engineering phase for widening to four lanes.

However, state and local officials are still meeting to discuss how the road should be widened and how many lanes should be included.

At issue is the 1.2-mile stretch of Willow Road in Northfield, which is two lanes. Willow Road on either side of that stretch is four lanes.

Some have argued that the portion of road should be widened to four or more lanes to alleviate traffic jams, while others -- notably, Northfield officials -- have said such a move would make the road unsafe for pedestrians.

According to Schoenberg's newsletter: "The initial phase of engineering work for a four-lane Willow Road in Northfield is progressing on schedule and the state has committed \$25 million in capital funding for the improvements, which also include an underpass connecting Willow and Clarkson parks."

The statement contradicts the Illinois Department of Transportation, which has said that no decision has been made. In addition, IDOT officials continue to host meetings with a "Community Advisory Group," or CAG, and meetings are not expected to conclude for at least another year. The next meeting is scheduled for Sept. 15 at New Trier High School's Northfield campus.

A four-lane plan was in the works more than two years ago, but last summer, state officials scrapped it. Officials at the time said they intended to start from scratch and would be open to other options.

Bob Hayward, a member of the CAG and chairman of Northfield's Traffic and Transportation Committee, said the conflicting accounts of IDOT's intentions shake public trust.

He accused state lawmakers of violating laws that require community studies before major projects.

"The (CAG study) process is disingenuous, to say the least, and a complete sham on the Illinois taxpayer and for everyone involved in the process," he said.

Several Northfield members of the CAG have been skeptical of the community meetings, and the Schoenberg newsletter only verified doubts, Hayward said.

"I question why all of us are wasting time and money on this process," Hayward said. "It seems to me that IDOT needs to start from scratch again, because the months and months of hard work that everyone's put in have been nothing but a sham and a fraud."

Schoenberg acknowledged that he expects the road ultimately to be widened to four lanes. He said the newsletter entry was referring to roughly \$25 million in state funds set aside for widening the road. That figure is based in part on the findings of another Willow Road study two years ago, during which residents from Winnetka and Northfield brainstormed solutions.

"I expect the findings here will mirror those of the earlier engineering study," he said.

While that study was inconclusive, the Lakota Group engineering firm did map out how the road could be configured to include more lanes. Among other possible layouts, one showed how Willow would look with four lanes.

Schoenberg said Northfield officials are resisting the inevitable widening of Willow Road and that they were engaged in an "ongoing practice of breaking the bank to stick local taxpayers with an exorbitant bill."

"Obviously, there are a small minority of people in Northfield who take exception with anything but what they want, even though the village does not own the road," he said.

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