

## State Senator alleges Northfield "slush fund" to fight Willow Road project

By John P. Huston, TribLocal reporter



The Office of Jeff Schoenberg  
State Sen. Jeff Schoenberg,  
D-Evanston

Northfield's State Senator is accusing the village of creating a "slush fund" to fight a project to widen Willow Road that has financially crippled the village. One local official called the allegations "woefully inaccurate."

Jeff Schoenberg, D-Evanston, said Monday that Northfield officials have "operated as if they have had a blank check to spend as much as they want on politically-connected attorneys, lobbyists and public relations firms who have run up huge bills at local taxpayers' expense."

Last week, he filed a Freedom of Information Act request seeking records of Northfield's expenditures dating back to 1995. Specifically, it looks for money paid to "attorneys, lobbyists, public relations firms and other consultants hired by the Village to fight the wishes of surrounding communities and the Illinois Department of Transportation for a safer design of the 1.2 mile stretch of state-owned road that runs through the Village."

Northfield officials and many residents oppose widening Willow Road to four or five lanes. They have expressed support for no more than three lanes. The Illinois Department of Transportation is in the preliminary stages of a project that aims to increase safety and mobility on the road, which also affects the villages of Northbrook, Glenview and Winnetka.

Schoenberg said the village's opposition to a four- or five-lane Willow Road has included "massive spending that has now left Northfield strapped for cash and seeking to raise new taxes."

Northfield Village Manager Stacy Sigman said she was working on filling Schoenberg's information request, but was surprised to hear about the state senator's comments, calling them "woefully inaccurate."

"He hasn't even bothered to wait until he has facts and figures to know how much we've spent," Sigman said.

She refrained from commenting until the data is collected, adding only, "I think it's going to demonstrate the absolute opposite."

Sigman admitted Northfield is going through a difficult economic time, but said it is due to the economy, lagging auto sales, pension fund requirements and a restrictive property tax-cap.

"I don't think that shortfall of cash has anything to do with the Willow Road issue," she said.

In his Sept. 8 letter to Sigman asking for financial records, Schoenberg was harsh with his criticism.

"At a time when local tax dollars are increasingly scarce and taxpayers are acutely sensitive to wasteful government spending, such cavalier and prolific spending certainly warrants closer review," he wrote.

Sigman said she hoped to have the records by Friday, but due to the expansive nature of the request she may ask for an extension. State FOIA law requires public bodies to provide records within five business days, unless it is considered a burdensome request, in which case the deadline may be extended.

Northfield Village President Fred Gougler said he didn't want to respond specifically to Schoenberg's comments, other than calling his words "hostile."

"It's very strong language," Gougler said. "I'm disappointed that the senator is taking such a strong political view of this issue rather than being more sensitive to the local needs of our community."

Gougler said his village sees the Willow Road project as protecting safety for pedestrians and motorists, keeping with the general design of the community and protecting property values.

As part of the preliminary project phase, IDOT has created a community advisory group to discuss options for the project and for community members to voice their opinions. The next meeting is scheduled for 6 p.m. Sept. 15 in Room C-234 at New Trier High School, 7 Happ Road, Northfield.

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