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### State looks for fixes to Willow Road congestion

#### Advisory group to involve region in proposing solutions

Jon Hilkevitch

Getting Around

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A onetime country road dotted with willow trees in Northfield that once flowed smoothly with Sunday drivers is now a mini-Hillside Strangler for traffic.

There has been broad agreement for years on the North Shore that **Willow Road** in Northfield causes headaches for drivers from Winnetka to the northwest suburbs.

Disagreement could hardly run deeper, however, over how to fix the congestion problem on Willow.

From Green Bay Road in Winnetka to Arlington Heights and Palatine, where Willow Road becomes Palatine Road, traffic flows onto four lanes. The only exception is a 1.2-mile-long, two-lane strip of Willow where there are backups on both sides of Northfield. This two-lane section was never revamped to function as the major east-west arterial street for which it is being used today by more than 20,000 vehicles daily.

The core issues in the dispute evoke a familiar ring across the Chicago area. The specifics of this case pit the desire of Northfield officials and residents to maintain the small-town atmosphere on the main street slicing through their village against the needs of businesses in adjacent suburbs for a modern, congestion-free roadway just off a major expressway.

"Northfield has a wonderful Mayberry feel that you don't see so often in suburban towns," said Stacy Alberts Sigman, the village manager. "We don't want to lose that charm."

After numerous taxpayer-funded studies and proposed projects on expanding Willow that were offered over the last three decades, the **Illinois Department of Transportation** has little to show in terms of improving the state-maintained road.

IDOT is now, again, going back to the drawing board, this time with a strategy to come up with a "context sensitive solution."

If it works here -- and there are many obstacles and entrenched viewpoints that will make success difficult -- the context-sensitive format will be used to settle and propel forward other stalled controversial projects in Illinois, officials said.

The way the lanes pinch down to two lanes from four lanes virtually guarantees bottlenecks during peak travel periods. Add to that tie-up just one vehicle attempting to turn left at an intersection, and traffic can back up almost into a neighboring suburb.

Amid children playing nearby and only partial sidewalks available for pedestrians, impatient drivers sometimes steer onto Willow's gravel shoulders to get ahead of the long lines of traffic on the 35 mph roadway, which is bordered by parks, schools, homes and religious centers.

In early October, a Willow Road Citizen Advisory Group is scheduled to meet for the first time. Its mission is to embark on a process of even more studies, and extensive dialogue, involving not only Northfield, but the regional community.

About \$25 million has been allocated in the state's new capital improvement legislation for expanding Willow Road. It's unclear whether that money will be adequate, and if it will even be available when it comes time to build.

By 2011, the context-sensitive scenario calls for winnowing down alternative plans to settle on a project that most people can live with, officials said. Construction would start as early as 2013, barring lawsuits causing further delay.

"The two-year process we are kicking off now will offer meaningful and frequent opportunities for public comment," said Pete Harnet, a bureau chief of programming at IDOT.

Northfield's elected officials support the context-sensitive approach, but they question the need to start back at square one regarding what is perhaps the most-studied mile of road in Illinois.

They also are concerned that the still-undetermined makeup of the citizen advisory group could be stacked against Northfield with members from Glenview, Northbrook, Winnetka and other suburbs where there is support for Willow to run four lanes through Northfield, a town of fewer than 6,000 residents.

"We reached an agreement with IDOT four years ago to spend \$6 million to \$8 million to build a three-lane road that would improve mobility through Northfield and preserve the character of our community," said Northfield Village President Fred Gougler.

The plan, however, effectively fell one vote short when Gov. Rod Blagojevich refused to support it.

"Now we are engaging in another study that could result in spending \$25 million or more on an expansion that will draw more traffic to Willow and worsen congestion," Gougler said.

Northfield officials thought they had a deal with the state and surrounding communities in 2005 to add turning lanes as well as engineer other traffic improvements to ease backups -- but keep the basic two-lane configuration.

But the agreement collapsed. Northfield officials say Northbrook and Glenview worked behind the scenes to scuttle the plan, with the help of state Sen. Jeffrey Schoenberg, D-Evanston.

Both villages have corporations and commercial development that rely on increasing traffic to bring in business. The enterprises include The Glen, a mixed-use community on the site of the former Glenview Naval Air Station; and Techny, more than 700 acres in Northbrook that is also being developed.

Schoenberg, whose district includes Northfield and other North Shore towns, last year dropped his yearslong opposition to widening Willow. He now supports a four-lane plan that includes a fifth left-turn lane at some intersections -- a design that Northfield officials say would be akin to having a highway cut through their community.

Schoenberg said "probably 98 percent of the people" support the four-lane concept, while "there is a very small segment of the Northfield political community who will never change their decades-old opposition" to widening Willow.

"Northfield has spent millions of dollars on lobbyists and other activities over the years to block any effort to bring change," Schoenberg said. "But it is a state road that impacts residents and businesses throughout the region. I am hopeful that the more inclusive context-sensitive design process will lead to some common ground."

Glenview Village President Kerry Cummings said she is sympathetic to safety concerns in Northfield. But she thinks design elements under consideration, including a pedestrian tunnel underneath Willow in Northfield, will mitigate any problems caused by a four-lane road.

"We successfully dealt with the same street-widening issue in Glenview on **Lake Avenue**, which is a regional connector road bordered by elementary and high schools," Cummings said.

Don't tell that to Cindy Miller, a Northfield crossing guard whose colleague was struck by a vehicle on Willow some years ago.

"This can be a very dangerous road and we don't need it expanded to four or five lanes," said Miller, 51, who has worked about 10 years at the intersection of Willow and Wagner Road near Middlefork School, which serves kindergartners through third-graders.

"These are my kids and I am protective of them," she said.

Contact *Getting Around* at [jhilkevitch@tribune.com](mailto:jhilkevitch@tribune.com) or c/o the Chicago Tribune, 435 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611. Read recent columns at [chicagotribune.com/gettingaround](http://chicagotribune.com/gettingaround)

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