

State policy may ease Willow Road standoff

[North Edition]

Chicago Tribune - Chicago, Ill.

Author: Dan Gibbard
Date: Jun 26, 2007
Start Page: 1
Section: Metro
Document Types: News
Text Word Count: 709

Document Text

The sometimes nasty battle over the Northfield stretch of Willow Road appears to have taken a turn toward civility in the last few months, with a new state policy meant to give greater weight to the effect that roads have on towns.

The process asks nearly everyone affected by plans for a new or revamped road -- residents, churches, schools, businesses, nearby towns -- what they think should be done. Called context-sensitive solutions or context-sensitive design, the idea is to keep from building roads that can carry lots of traffic but at the expense of a town's character or other interests.

"In certain situations it's not a good thing to be focused on how many cars you can move," said Winnetka Village President Ed Woodbury. "It's how you can move them the right way."

Willow narrows from four lanes to two as it passes through Northfield, which causes backups, especially during rush hour. Though that irritates many drivers, Northfield says plans to widen the road would be unsafe, particularly for schoolchildren who have to cross the busy street.

John Birkinbine, Northfield's village president, held out hope that the new policy could break the impasse.

"I don't think Northfield has ever said, 'No, no, forever no.'"

"he said. "I think we've always said, 'We've got these safety concerns' ... [and] if the school people and the park people said they believe the crossing would be safe the way it's worked out, that would solve our principal concern."

Meanwhile, Winnetka, traditionally a neutral party in the fight, teamed up with Northfield this year at the prodding of state Sen. Jeff Schoenberg (D-Evanston), and the two villages have hired the Lakota Group to draft a plan for Willow as it runs through both towns.

Woodbury said he has not endorsed a configuration for Willow, but the partnership makes sense because the towns share New Trier High School, athletic fields and similar profiles along Willow. The Lakota Group's Scott Freres, a Winnetka native who is heading the project, noted the similarities.

"In Winnetka and Northfield, [Willow] is their main street, which it is not in Glenview or Northbrook," he said.

The design process is under way, Freres said, but it will likely be late summer before his company can line up meetings with all the "stakeholders," as the Illinois Department of Transportation calls those with an interest in what happens to the road.

"We're going to balance the objectives of transportation engineers ... with the character and community desires that Winnetka and Northfield want to establish," Freres said. "I think there's a marriage there."

As yet it's uncertain how easy it will be to build a consensus on this span of Willow, probably the North Shore's most contentious mile of pavement. On one side of the debate are Glenview and Northbrook, which have invested heavily in economic development along Willow, including The Glen on the south side and new retail complexes at Patriot Boulevard and Waukegan Road in Northbrook.

Those towns argue that Willow is a regional road and the bottleneck prevents customers from easily accessing their retail base.

Northfield, on the other hand, has long argued that a wide, fast road would cut its town in two and make it dangerous for children to get from the south side, where most people live, to the schools along Willow's north side.

But it's a mistake to limit the argument to how many lanes the road should be, Schoenberg said. Instead, he said, safety factors such as bike lanes and walkability should be included in the debate.

"Also, what could be done to provide greater definition and identity for the central part of Northfield?" the senator asked. "Do you want to create a boulevard effect, and to what extent? None of those factors would go into [traditional] IDOT planning."

Freres is well aware of the emotional stake Northfield residents and drivers from surrounding towns have in the project, but he believes a solution is possible.

"There are acceptable alternatives to meet both objectives -- to widen [the road] and balance that with the desires and objectives to make it safe and to establish and maintain their community character," he said. "We can do that."

dgibbard@tribune.com

Credit: By Dan Gibbard, Tribune staff reporter

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.