

Willow Road meeting leaves some residents frustrated, others hopeful

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Residents of Glenview, Northbrook, Northfield and Winnetka were invited to offer fresh input on the future of Willow Road at a public meeting last week, leaving some residents frustrated and others hopeful.

At the open house meeting March 4 at the Renaissance Hotel in Northbrook, The Illinois Department of Transportation launched phase one of its 24-month Context Sensitive Solutions planning process-anticipated to end in the spring of 2011, with hopes that it will deliver a solid plan for the future.

"We started in the fall with a fresh start to put multiple proposals on the table," said Peter Harmet, IDOT bureau chief of programming. "I think the stakeholders are going to give us a lot of good ideas to explore. And that's what this process is structured to do, is try and look at all those factors and see how we can satisfy all of those concerns."

The multi-decade Willow Road debate primarily concerns a 1.2-mile stretch between Illinois Route 43 (Waukegan Road) and I94 (Edens Expressway), with Northfield in the center, Northbrook and Glenview to the west and Winnetka to the east.

At the center of the debate, is whether or not to add lanes and widen Willow Road in the portion of the road falling primarily in Northfield, which consists mostly of two lanes.

Northfield residents generally don't want to widen the road, with fear it will create safety hazards for school children crossing the road, whereas many Glenview residents would prefer more lanes to reduce traffic congestion.

At the meeting residents received an automated slideshow presentation of planning logistics. In another room, residents viewed large-scale maps of the region-on which they placed Post-it comments-as well as talked with IDOT consultants, filled out comment forms or dictated their remarks to a court reporter.

Displays included information IDOT gathered from its Community Awareness Group meetings, which took place in November and January. The CAG formed in fall 2009, and consists of 25 people from the four communities.

"I am disappointed that we are going through another two year study of Willow Road," said Northfield Village President Fred Gougler. "Why are we doing it again when we did it before, and why are we doing it again at a higher cost-particularly when the state doesn't have any money?"

Two previous studies were conducted: The Village of Northfield led one study around 2005 with IDOT's input, which offered a three-lane solution with new turn lanes and street signals. The villages of Northfield and Winnetka performed another study in 2008.

Harmet said the 2005 plan was estimated to cost between \$5 million and \$8 million, but he was not able to give an estimate on future plans-though funds are expected to come from a multi-year capital program called Illinois Jobs Now. Regardless, he said both previous studies will be considered in the future planning process.

Meanwhile, Harmet said the contract for the consultant team for the 24-month planning process is \$1.7 million.

Northfield resident and CAG member Robert Hayward call the presentation at the Northbrook hotel one of "smoke and mirrors," and said the same money used to pay the IDOT consultants could be better used to launch the previous 2005 plan.

"I'm a firm advocate [for] progress," Hayward said. "Progress is not wasting another 10 years of all of our lives and wasting 10s of millions of dollars chasing an illogical and reckless plan. Progress is taking the previously approved and funded three-lane 2005 plan that IDOT fully studied and funded and the surrounding communities agreed was the best plan...and putting it in place today."

However, Don Owen, Glenview village capital projects director and a CAG member, said he's pleased with how IDOT is proceeding, and said he feels like all the communities impacted are coming together-whereas Northfield and Winnetka led much of the planning in 2005.

"I think [the meeting] was very well organized," Owen said. "It was a very nice introduction for residents that might not have participated before in the process. They got a chance to see how the process is going to work."

Owen said Glenview residents are concerned because as Willow Road is being used now, traffic is being diverted to secondary roads.

Glenview is picking up traffic that belongs on Willow Road, agreed Glenview resident Tom Kloempken. Because of the constriction in the road, drivers going to and from the Edens are finding other routes and causing additional traffic, he added.

"I don't feel frustrated; I don't feel impressed. I just want to wait and see," Kloempken said. "This has been going on for so many years, that I hope I will live to see it being done."

The entire process through construction completion could take as long as six years, Harmet said.

Comments will continue to be collected as part of the Public Meeting No. 1 record through March 19 online at www.willowroadfuture.org.

The next CAG meeting is tentatively scheduled for April 15 from 6 to 8 p.m. at New Trier High School's Northfield Campus. The public comment period will take place from 8 to 9 p.m.

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