

Willow Road: Tensions mount between Schoenberg, Northfield officials

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Northfield officials responded to allegations of a Willow Road "slush fund" with a statement condemning the state for planning to spend upwards of \$31 million on a widening project.

In a statement dated Sept. 13, Sen. Jeff Schoenberg, D-9th, accused Northfield officials of "massive spending that has now left Northfield strapped for cash and seeking to raise new taxes" in order to fight possible Willow Road expansion.

In addition, he requested village records pertaining to money spent on lobbyists, public relations firms and consultants.

State and local officials have a long history of back-and-forth arguing about the two-lane 1.2-mile stretch of Willow Road in Northfield.

Northfield has promoted a three-lane plan, while Schoenberg has lobbied for four or more lanes. And earlier this month, the state senator declared a four-lane plan all but finalized -- despite Illinois Department of Transportation claims to the contrary.

That declaration triggered the latest conflict.

In a letter to Northfield Village Manager Stacy Sigman, Schoenberg asked for records of expenditures dating to 1995. His letter suggested that Northfield leaders were wasting local tax revenues for their cause.

Schoenberg said 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."

In response to Schoenberg's request, the village said it's keeping its residents interests in mind when it spends money to prevent the state from widening the road beyond three lanes.

"The amount of money the Village of Northfield has spent to protect our citizens from being steamrolled by Senator Jeff Schoenberg pales in comparison to the \$31 million spent by the senator on a five-lane Willow Road project he created with former governor Rod Blagojevich," according to a village statement. "The Village of Northfield is in favor of an \$8M plan that builds a safer, wider Willow Road for our children and residents."

Officials said they will comply with the FOIA request. By press time, a response was not yet available.

While the latest exchange between Schoenberg and Northfield seems heated, it's certainly not the first time the debate has become personal.

When Schoenberg in 2008 first announced a state plan to widen the road -- a plan that was later scrapped -- he did not invite Northfield officials, instead accusing them of stalling talks with the state.

Northfield at the time responded by accusing Schoenberg of slandering the town.