

## Willow Road discussion focuses on "school zones"

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State officials have said they'll consider establishing school zones as part of anticipated reconstruction of Willow Road in Northfield, but some wonder why such protections aren't already in place.

Sunset Ridge District 29's two schools border Willow Road -- Sunset Ridge School at Sunset Ridge Road and Middlefork School at Wagner Road.

Neither school lists its address on Willow Road.

Still, school officials say the buildings' proximity to Willow Road pose a safety risk for children.

The district estimates that more than one-third of students at Sunset Ridge and Middlefork live south of Willow Road, meaning that about 160 children somehow must cross the street. However, that does not necessarily mean they all walk to school.

The schools fall within the 1.2-mile stretch of two-lane road, which state officials are considering widening. The road is controlled by the state.

Northfield officials have made efforts to curb bad driving near Middlefork School already. Two years ago, the village installed red-light cameras at that intersection, citing pedestrian traffic as a primary reason.

But when it comes to speed control, village options are limited.

Phoebe Raymond, school board president for District 29, is a member of the Illinois Department of Transportation-sponsored Community Advisory Group that has sought input from residents regarding Willow Road plans.

Raymond said her main concern during the process is student safety.

"Safety has always been at the forefront of anything we do, any sort of policy," she said. "School zones are just a part of the larger context of safety."

Raymond said the decades of debating Willow's future have only hindered progress when it comes to improving safety there.

In the meantime, the schools provide crossing guards to steer the children across the busy street.

Peter Harmet, bureau chief of programming for IDOT, said pedestrian safety will be the subject of an upcoming CAG meeting. School zones, he said, would be part of that discussion. "We're going to talk about the whole gamut of safety issues," he said.

If state officials were to establish school zones there, traffic would be forced to slow from the current speed limit of 35 miles per hour.

In Illinois, the speed within school zones is limited to 20 miles per hour when children are present (between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m.). In addition, talking on a cell phone is prohibited when driving through a school zone.

Speeding fines are higher in school zones -- \$150 for the first offense and \$300 for the second offense, in addition to a \$50 fee paid to the school district. And a driver who causes an injury or death within a school zone is automatically considered to have been driving recklessly, according to Illinois law.

Some school zones include additional safety features - such as in Winnetka, where the school zone bordering Crow Island School includes a flashing yellow light to alert drivers when children are outside.

Some parents in Northfield have lost patience with state officials, who they say should make school zones a priority.

Melissa Bianucci said that whatever the outcome of the ongoing Willow Road debate, school zones should be included.

"When you have kids who don't have bus service -- and there are three parks, kids from all over, not just Northfield -- it's just safer to do the three-lane configuration," she said.

Bianucci said she was disappointed that more hasn't been done already.

"It gives me the creeps, the fact that they won't put up a school zone sign," she said.