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Schoenberg: Willow Road needed a political detour

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Northfield was intentionally left out of a recent announcement to widen Willow Road, a state official said.

"No, they were not notified," Sen. Jeff Schoenberg, D-9th, told Pioneer Press.

The Illinois Department of Transportation announced April 15 it would commence a \$4 million engineering study to widen the 1.2-mile stretch of Willow Road in Northfield from two lanes to four beginning in July.

Organizers have noted the announcement was hastily assembled.

The reason for excluding Northfield, Schoenberg said, was because he considered village officials to be purposely delaying Willow Road talks. Village officials and the state disagree about whether Willow Road should be three lanes or four lanes.

Northfield, he said, opted out of earlier meetings with state officials about an ongoing \$90,000 state-funded study of the road. The study, which is not complete, is being conducted by a committee made up of Northfield and Winnetka residents.

"Northfield has consistently rebuffed attempts by the Illinois Department of Transportation in recent weeks to be briefed on the 'Context-Sensitive Design' process," he said.

Schoenberg accused Northfield of "playing its political influence" to stall a widening project.

"It would be a far better use of Northfield's tax dollars to spend them on bike paths and trees instead of legal and political consulting fees," he said.

Village President John Birkinbine denied that Northfield was delaying talks. He said the village was actively pushing to advance the process.

"How that translates to dragging our feet is beyond me," he said.

He argued the IDOT plan was announced too hastily and without Northfield's interests in mind.

"Nobody has called to even say, 'We forgot to ask you,'" Birkinbine said.

The timing of the announcement -- weeks before the final Willow Road committee meeting -- was fishy, he said.

"I think the senator has pulled the rug out from under everyone who has participated on the task force and everyone who showed up," he said. "That involves hundreds of people from both villages."

The IDOT plan has sparked an explosion of reactions from Northfield residents. Many reiterated Birkinbine's concerns, but others were less resistant.

Cindy Cherpak, a Northfield resident, said that not everyone in the village opposes a four-lane Willow Road.

Safety, she said, is important, but so is traffic flow.

"Nobody talks about the bottleneck problem that occurs, the back-ups," she said. "The issue is to move the traffic through town as quickly as possible."

It's an issue that can't wait forever, Cherpak said.

"People are sick and tired of the condition of Willow Road," she said. "It's an eye-sore; it's an atrocity. It's got to be done."

The Village Board will meet at 6 p.m., April 29, at the Village Hall for a strategic planning discussions. Birkinbine said the Willow Road issue likely will be on the agenda.



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