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Willow Road widening headed for the fast lane?

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A state plan to widen the Northfield section of Willow Road to four lanes has provoked a range of responses -- from praise in Glenview to anger in Northfield.

The Illinois Department of Transportation announced April 15 it would study the widening of state-owned Willow Road in Northfield.

About \$4 million in state money has been earmarked for the first two phases of an engineering study to begin in July, said Sen. Jeff Schoenberg, D-9th. The study will coincide with an unrelated resurfacing project in Winnetka and Northfield.

He was unsure when the widening project might begin.

Part of the state money, Schoenberg said, would also study a proposed underpass between Willow Park and Clarkson Park, an area with high pedestrian traffic.

Schoenberg credited a joint study by Winnetka and Northfield as the rationale behind the IDOT initiative.

"It's expected that the engineering study will move at an accelerated pace because of the thorough and detailed information available from the Context-Sensitive Design study that is near completion," he said. "A great deal of the heavy lifting for this plan has already been done through a lengthy public process."

But Northfield Village President John Birkinbine said the study has suggested no such desire for wider lanes.

"The public input we have received overwhelmingly indicates that people do not want four lanes," he said. "(IDOT) makes it sound the opposite."

The state-funded study in dispute is being conducted by the Willow Road Enhancement Steering Committee and the Chicago-based planning firm, the Lakota Group.

The committee, which includes community leaders from Winnetka and Northfield, hosted a series of community workshops in the fall of 2007 to identify public concerns about the road and brainstorm solutions.

The committee is still compiling its recommendations and will conclude meetings in May. The group's progress can be viewed at www.thelakotagroup.com/willowroad.

Birkinbine said participants were more concerned with safety at intersections than with increased traffic capacity.

He added that the proposed pedestrian underpass might increase safety in the area, but that it would be positioned too far away from the area schools to have the desired impact.

"I expect individuals and groups will fight this tooth and nail if they try to jam this down our throats," he said.

Outside of Northfield, the reaction was different.

Winnetka Village President Ed Woodbury said the Winnetka section of the road would not be affected.

"I certainly understand Northfield's disappointment," he said.

Despite a lack of local consensus regarding the necessary number of lanes along the road in Northfield, Woodbury said he was glad to see the steering committee's recommendations come into play.

"The really good news is that the state's going to use what they've been working on for the last year," he said.

Glenview officials for two decades have wanted Willow Road widened to four traffic lanes through Northfield to help traffic flow regionally.

That desire intensified in recent years with the opening of the Willow Creek shopping center and Patriot Marketplace and the redevelopment of the former Glenview Naval Air Station at the Glen.

So Glenview Village President Kerry Cummings was pleased with Tuesday's announcement.

"This is a tremendous improvement for the region," she said. "It helps solve congestion issues, which impact both residents and businesses in our region."

Glenview passed resolutions in 1992 and 1995 advocating that Willow be widened through Northfield. The village hired a lobbyist in 2005 to press that view in Springfield.

Becky Hurley, chairwoman of the Willow Road Enhancement Steering Committee, said IDOT's announcement came sooner than anticipated, but that she was pleased with her committee's progress so far.

"I think it reflects a lot of good thinking," she said.

Regarding IDOT's planned work, Hurley said that with two committee meetings still planned, it's too soon to say whether the IDOT plan reflects the report.

The report, she said, was not intended to make an argument, but rather to present options based on a wide range of opinions. She added that pedestrian safety was the top issue for the committee.

"There are a lot of suggestions that the report calls for to try and improve safety at the intersections," Hurley said.



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