

## Willow Road: IDOT document raises questions on Willow Road

(<http://www.pioneerlocal.com/winnetka/news/2180232.winnetka-willow-042210-s1.article>)

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A construction schedule posted to a state Website has raised suspicion among Northfield residents, who say the document is proof that the officials have already made up their minds to widen Willow Road.

State officials, though, said the document is merely a "placeholder" until an actual plan is agreed upon.

The Web posting came as the Illinois Department of Transportation is in the process of hosting community meetings as part of the "context-sensitive" solutions process required by state law before major construction projects.

The five-year capital plan was published on the IDOT Website on April 15, hours before IDOT hosted one such community meeting.

According to the IDOT document, \$31.4 million would be spent between 2011 and 2016 to reconstruct the road. Of that total, \$25 million would be used in part for "additional lanes," although the plan does not specify how many lanes would be added.

The document is part of a larger list of projects titled "FY 2011-2016 Highway Improvement Program."

Currently, the 1.2-mile stretch of Willow Road in Northfield is two lanes. The stretches on either side of the town are four and five lanes.

Many in Northfield have long advocated for a three-lane configuration that they have argued would both alleviate traffic and maintain pedestrian safety. But Glenview and Northbrook, to the west, have argued that nothing short of four lanes would ease traffic congestion in their towns.

The current initiative is the latest attempt to resolve the dispute, and it comes on the heels of previously scrapped plans and studies.

At an April 15 meeting of an IDOT-hosted "Community Advisory Group," or CAG, members said the planning schedule represented a working plan and that the group's efforts were already moot.

Bob Hayward, a CAG member and chairman of Northfield's Traffic and Transportation Committee, said IDOT was ignoring its legal obligation by proceeding with a pre-determined solution in mind.

"We should dismiss this room, because this is a sham," he said.

Peter Harmet, bureau chief of programming for IDOT, said that the construction schedule was not an official plan and that the state has no intentions of widening the road. Placeholders, he said, are common practice for framing a schedule and showing how money might be spent.

"Our decision is going to be made on comments that are written down, analyses that are done by you," Harmet said to the group.

Group members who were uneasy with the process became even more so when IDOT sought additional input.

Among the CAG's stated goals was the formation of a "problem statement" to use as a foundation for possible solutions. But when IDOT officials showed members a pre-written problem statement, CAG members reacted with skepticism.

Many members said the statement was further evidence that the CAG was being left out of the planning process.

However, Chuck Stenzel -- a member of TranSystems, an engineering consultant hired by the state -- said the statement was merely a template to be amended and expanded upon. The statement was fairly brief with only vague descriptions of the road's current layout.

"It's a starting point," he said.