

IDOT begins new Willow Road study, scraps old one

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It's back to square one for Willow Road.

After years and years of debate over the future of the road --specifically the two-lane stretch in Northfield -- the Illinois Department of Transportation said it was starting from scratch. Again.

At issue is whether the state should widen the road to four lanes to match the configuration to the east and the west.

On Aug. 25, IDOT officials met with residents in Northbrook to outline its plan for a series of more community meetings as part of a "context-sensitive" study, much like one conducted a year earlier.

A spokesman for the project could not be reached by telephone but said in a voicemail to Pioneer Press that this study is independent of previous ones.

"The project is being restarted," John Baczek, an IDOT spokesman, said in the message.

The public input phase is expected to take up to a year and a half, he said. The group will seek opinions from residents of Glenview, Northbrook, Northfield and Winnetka.

Local and state officials have gone back and forth for years regarding whether to widen the road. Most recently, IDOT in 2007 authorized \$90,000 for a study group made up of residents and community leaders from Northfield and Winnetka.

The group -- called the Willow Road Enhancement Steering Committee -- did not reach a consensus after 11 months of meetings, but it noted that public input favored a two- or three-lane configuration.

However, before that report was completed, the state announced that it would commit \$4 million for an engineering plan to widen the road. Since then, that plan seems to have been pushed aside to make way for the newest study.

It wasn't the first time plans appeared finalized only to be scrapped.

In 1999, Northfield and IDOT agreed to a plan that would increase Willow Road to three lanes. The plan later was postponed and eventually was nixed.

Northfield officials continued to argue that the three-lane solution would better address traffic flow and safety, but IDOT --with the support some residents of Glenview and Northbrook --pushed for four lanes.

Villages west of Northfield made the case that more traffic coming from the Edens Expressway could mean better business in their towns.