

Northfield points out errors in IDOT's latest Willow Road study

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Northfield officials are questioning whether the state has its Willow Road facts straight and whether inaccurate information could compromise the latest study.

The Illinois Department of Transportation and a consultant firm hired to re-study the Willow Road issue hosted the second meeting of the "community advisory group," or CAG, on Jan. 14. Northfield representatives to the group took the opportunity to point out details they felt were either incorrect or misleading.

For some in Northfield, the apparent inconsistencies bolstered their argument that the Willow Road issue is local and that outsiders don't have the necessary insight to make a decision.

Some details -- like crosswalk configuration -- were minor, while others hit harder.

One suggestion that bothered Northfield representatives was that a recent Willow Road study -- the Willow Road Enhancement Steering Committee, commonly called the Lakota Study -- was never finished.

In fact, while the study's final recommendations were not conclusive, the study was completed in May 2008. At that time, the committee acknowledged that it could not reach a consensus regarding the ideal number of lanes.

Peter Harmet, bureau chief of programming for IDOT, said in an interview that it was fair to say the Lakota Study was not completed. The study was intended to settle the lane issue, and it didn't.

"To me, 'incomplete' and 'inconclusive' are pretty similar words," he said. "They did not reach a conclusion on it. That's what we're getting at."

Northfield representatives also took issue with the IDOT suggestion that a previous three-lane plan (preferred by many in Northfield) was a routine study like any other, not to be acted upon necessarily.

Had it not been scratched, construction would have begun in 2005.

"This was not a study," Stacy Sigman, Northfield village manager, said in an e-mail. "It was a formal Phase I and Phase II process. Furthermore, it was not a 'Northfield Plan'. IDOT paid for 100 percent of this work, was involved during every part and public meeting, and approved every technical part of it, and it was ready to construct."

The IDOT construction paperwork for that plan was signed by village officials, who anticipated it would be carried out soon. But Springfield officials did not follow up, and the plan died, Sigman said.

Harmet said IDOT intends to take the previous two Willow Road initiatives into account.

"We're not going to reinvent all of that," he said. "We're going to bring it into this forum as we get to those points."

Other inconsistencies were based on a "context audit" completed by IDOT. CAG members were to review the audit and make comments, but some details appeared to be inaccurate.

While the details were small, they gave some CAG members pause.

For example, the audit listed the wrong number of red-light cameras at the intersection of Willow and Waukegan roads in Northfield. It also identified a crosswalk where 3 Lakes Drive (or Fox Meadow Lane, to the south) cross Willow Road. Sigman pointed out the errors, noting that such details should be verified to ensure confidence in the process.

Harmet said he welcomed CAG members to point out errors and that they would be corrected.

"This is a process of bringing information for them to review," he said. "The process is actually doing exactly what was intended."

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