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Willow Road rage

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In April of 2008, state leaders announced a plan to widen Willow Road in Northfield to four lanes.

It wasn't the first time such a pronouncement was issued. Or the second time. Or probably even the third or fourth time. To tell the truth, we've lost count of all the times the state has announced plans for Willow, or studies that leaders were confident would lead to improvement plans.

This is a big quality-of-life issue in the northern suburbs, because Willow Road is a major thoroughfare in that area. But a bucolic stretch of Willow Road through Northfield remains . . . a slow go.

Willow is mainly a two-lane ribbon of asphalt as it winds for 1.2 miles through the northern suburb. To the east and west, however, it's generally four lanes fed by the Edens Expressway, the Tri-State Tollway, malls, corporate campuses, and sprawling housing developments.

So what happens when that traffic hits Northfield? That's right . . . it sloooows down. Long lines of cars parade through the town that Northfield Village Manager Stacy Alberts Sigman says offers a touch of "Mayberry."

We're pretty sure that many road-raging drivers would trade that leafy charm for a wider road through Northfield. Everyone agrees that something must be done. But everyone doesn't agree on what that something is. Over the last decades, the state has spent millions of dollars on studies. And yet, as the Tribune's Jon Hilkevitch pointed out recently, the Illinois Department of Transportation has little to show for it.

So IDOT is trying again. This time its strategy is summed up in these buzz words: "context sensitive solution." What does that mean?

Well, for starters, money: The state has allocated \$25 million in its new capital improvement plan for expanding Willow Road.

And more talk: In early October, a Willow Road Citizen Advisory Group is scheduled to meet for the first time. Part of its mission: Start a "dialogue" involving not only Northfield residents and officials, but the regional community.

Oh, come on. There has been more than enough talk. Let's get on with fixing this problem. There looked to be a deal in 2005, according to Northfield Village President Fred Gougler, to spend \$6 million to \$8 million to add left-turn lanes "that would improve mobility through Northfield and preserve the character of our community." The plan made a lot of sense, but it died because then- Gov. Rod Blagojevich put a brick on it.

"Now we are engaging in another study that could result in spending \$25 million or more on an expansion that will draw more traffic to Willow and worsen congestion," Gougler said.

He's right.

There's a lot of pressure from larger communities and business interests. They want traffic to flow more smoothly. So do drivers. We've traveled Willow Road and we know how bad the traffic can be. But we also know that building a four-lane highway through a small town can damage the quality of life there.

This is probably the most studied mile of road in Illinois history. Dust off the three-lane road plan, which would reduce some of the heavy backups, and get it done.

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