

New Ideas for Willow Road

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More visible sidewalks near schools and new pedestrian underpasses that link to parks or bike trails were just some of the ideas brought up during a meeting last week to discuss potential improvements to Willow Road.

The Willow Road Enhancement Steering Committee, a joint effort by residents of Northfield and Winnetka, hosted its second of three public meetings Oct. 17 at the North Shore Senior Center. The series of workshops aims to identify public concerns regarding the road and brainstorm solutions to be presented to the respective village boards in January.

The committee, which includes community leaders from both villages, can only make recommendations. However, village liaisons attend the workshops. "I'm hoping this is something new," said Becky Hurley, the committee chairwoman. "It's a partnership of two villages."

The third meeting, which organizers say will focus on the road's actual lanes, will be held Nov. 29 at 7 p.m. at the North Shore Country Day School in Winnetka.

Round Two

At the first public workshop, last month, residents voiced their opinions, and the Lakota Group, a Chicago-based planning firm, compiled them. Scott Freres, a principal for the firm, said the recurring concerns were for safety and aesthetics. For example, residents don't like the rough transition from traffic to sidewalk. "What people were saying to us is they liked the separation of pedestrians and the road," he said.

Feedback from the first workshop showed that residents would like trees or grass areas as a buffer zone. "The more the merrier, as far as green space," Freres said. Residents also liked the idea of constructing medians to separate oncoming lanes of traffic, he said. A median, with light shrubbery or trees, might cut back on uncontrolled left turns and the cars that pass them on the right shoulder.

Freres added that residents did not want to clutter the possible medians with tall trees. Residents said they were concerned about the speed zone that crosses the intersection at Sunset Ridge Road, adjacent to Sunset Ridge School. The students there steer clear of the road because they feel exposed, Freres said. "What we heard from the kids is, 'Put more trees between us and the road,'" he said.

He suggested elaborate white paint or warning pavement to warn cars of the upcoming school zone. Reduced lane width could also help, he said. "If you make lanes narrower, cars go slower, and if you make lanes wider, cars go faster," Freres said. "It's a psychological barrier."

Pedestrians getting across the street elsewhere was another matter. "People like the idea of an underpass connection," Freres said. One spot for such an underpass, he said, could be between Willow Park and Clarkson Park. The low ground on either side of the road would mean slightly raising the street to accommodate pedestrian traffic from one side to the other. He added that an underpass would not affect the flood plain. With talks in preliminary stages, organizers said they did not know how much an underpass would cost to construct.

Freres said some residents have said they would like to cut off access to Willow Road. The process, which he said could improve traffic flow, would involve converting a few streets near Clarkson Park, on the south side of Willow, to cul-de-sacs. Other possibilities included reducing left-turn opportunities on the road to prevent backed-up traffic. And where left turns are unavoidable, residents wanted defined left-turn lanes.