

Northfield, Winnetka revisit issue of Willow Road

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By CHRISTOPHER PETERSON Staff Writer

Villagers from Winnetka and Northfield revisited the issue of what to do with Willow Road at a public meeting Sept. 19, only this time, organizers assured, residents' concerns will play a larger role.

The Lakota Group, a Chicago-based planning firm, hosted the meeting at the North Shore Senior Center with a simple goal: naming a goal.

Focus areas

The section of Willow Road under consideration stretches from Waukegan Road in Northfield to Crow Island in Winnetka. It passes schools, parks, wooded areas, downtown Northfield and residential areas of Winnetka.

The Lakota Group outlined community concerns based on roughly 40 interviews of community leaders, and while the road changes in function from town-to-town, residents had a similar idea of what the road should look like, said Scott Freres, a principle for Lakota and a Winnetka resident.

"There are common bond elements that the towns share," he told the filled auditorium.

Community input, he said, resulted in five recurring themes: safety, community character, aesthetics, driving experience and traffic capacity.

"Safety is probably the most fundamental goal that has the most teeth right now," Freres said.

The road, he said, should be pedestrian-friendly. He noted that children go far out of their way to avoid walking near the busy street.

"People have created little backyard paths to keep kids out of Willow Road," he said.

Community responses indicated that crosswalks were not safe because drivers could not see them far enough away to stop. Poor sign placement also limits response time for drivers, Freres said.

He added that several sections of the road lack a turn lane or a traffic signal -- specifically the turn at Forestway -- and cars turning left sometimes stop too abruptly for the cars following them.

According to the community interviews, bike paths would be a priority as well, but Freres said the participants expressed a general dislike for shared bike lanes in the road.

"They're all over the place because there's no designated place for them to be," he said.

The number of lanes has been an overarching theme for Willow Road, but Freres advised against limiting discussion to traffic jams.

"It's not going to drive our thinking and discussion," he said.

However, he said, the community is concerned with lane fluctuations, and several intersections would be a priority with any plan: Sunset Ridge, Wagner, Happ, Forestway and Hibbard.

Other possibilities included bridge improvements, trees to separate sidewalks from traffic, bike racks and improved signage.

Different approach

The future of Willow Road has been a long-time touchy subject for Winnetka and Northfield. The key to getting any project under way is recognizing group concerns, said Becky Hurley, of the Willow Road Steering Committee, the group spearheading the Willow Road initiative.

"Our purpose is to reach some sort of group understanding of what would be good for Willow Road," she said. "The heart of this process is community input."

Hurley noted that the group has no governing power and is only a recommending body.

The public workshop, the first of a series, is part of an Illinois Department of Transportation "context sensitive solutions" initiative. Representatives from both villages attended, including both village managers, school district representatives and police department representatives.

The philosophy, representatives said, is to move away from the statistics, data and engineering-based research that might have hindered community input in the past.

The group's next public meeting will be 7 p.m., Oct. 17, at the North Shore Senior Center. At that meeting, the public will brainstorm solutions for Willow Road, and in November, the group hopes to discuss ways to implement the solutions.

Ultimately, the group hopes to present options to the village boards and to IDOT in January.