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Frustration builds with Willow Road process

Hilary Gowins, Staff Writer

November 17, 2010 | 10:34 AM

Members of Northfield's Traffic and Transportation Committee aired frustrations and grievances Nov. 11 on what is seen by some as a David versus Goliath battle over how to handle expansion of the 1.2-mile stretch of Willow Road between Waukegan Road and the Interstate 94 interchange.

During last week's meeting, the blame was laid in part upon the Illinois Department of Transportation, but more directly on Sen. Jeff Schoenberg.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again," committee chairman Robert Hayward said. "[Schoenberg] is a disgrace to the office he holds."

While IDOT and Northfield officials have been working toward an understanding about the future of Willow Road, many members of the traffic committee feel Schoenberg is stalling the process through paperwork.

Village Manager Stacy Sigman reported that Schoenberg has filed two Freedom of Information Act requests, with a third recently submitted to Northfield school officials.

Sigman said the first FOIA request asked for a report on all dollars spent by the Village to keep Willow Road in its current state, and the second request sought detailed information on all money spent on roadways in Northfield.

Schoenberg's requests totaled 6,200 pages and cost more than \$900 for Northfield staff to compile. But Sigman said that when notified of the cost, Schoenberg, who has yet to pick up the paperwork, said he didn't feel he needed to pay.

Regardless, the Village has quite a challenging task ahead of it. As part of its Context Sensitive Solutions policy, IDOT is obligated by law to seek input and to investigate transportation solutions for the areas in question when formulating new plans. Part of this process is the Community Advisory Group meetings, which are held as a way to gain insight into stakeholders' point of view.

The Willow Road process began in the summer of 2009. Since then, there have been five CAG meetings, and while there are five more scheduled, with the next set for Thursday, Nov. 18, from 6-8 p.m. at New Trier's Northfield Campus, Hayward does not feel the meetings have accomplished much, adding after Thursday's meeting that he doesn't think anything will come of the CAG meetings or the input from the community in general.

IDOT is proposing the implementation of a five- to six-lane highway. This busy road would run past three schools, three churches and through downtown Northfield.

Many are questioning how contextually sensitive such a plan might be.

Traffic and Transportation Committee members are backing a three-lane highway plan that would accommodate the main source of congestion along Willow Road: left turns. By eliminating the left lane vehicle backup, the committee feels the situation could be remedied.

And the cost benefits? The three-lane plan was developed in a previous IDOT/Northfield collaboration between 1999-2005. This shovel-ready plan would cost \$5 million. The plan proposed by IDOT, and backed by Schoenberg, would cost an estimated \$35 million.

But Hayward doesn't think that the battle for Northfield's contextual solution will be resolved through CAG meetings and further discussions with IDOT.

"We will only get the 2005 plan if Gov. Quinn pushes it through," Hayward said. "IDOT just wants to pour more concrete to solve problems."

Reader Feedback

3-lane expansion smart compromise

November 21, 2010 | 02:51 PM

Widening Willow Road to 3 lanes is a smart option that is financially sound and appropriate. The \$35 million plan is bad for the community and kids from all over the north shore who play soccer and baseball at the parks that the 5-lane plan would encroach upon. Northfield is being unfairly blamed for stalling progress, when actually a plan was approved and ready to go years ago.....just waiting on IDOT and "politics as usual."

JJordan

November 21, 2010 | 10:57 AM

As per usual the money spent on studies and delaying tactics in opposing this project may please a few people, but in essence the road will eventually be widened And my thought it should be four lanes.

Jim Neer

GVR

November 20, 2010 | 08:12 PM

I have lived in Winnetka, Glenview and Northfield my entire 44 year life. As a current Winnetka resident, I travel along Willow Road from Winnetka to Northbrook on a daily basis. I can say with absolute conviction that the time saved (less than 2 minutes) in the change to 4-5 lanes from the current 2 lane configuration is truly not worth risking the safety of Northfield children--and all the children from Winnetka, Kenilworth, Glencoe, Glenview, Wilmette and others that regularly utilize the playfields and frequent Northfield's facilities. I have witnessed children crossing each day back and forth at the intercections. Increasing the lane capacity and therefore the width would require children to travel a much greater distance. This increases contact points, or in simple terms, points at which children can be hit by cars not stopping in time. This happened a number of years ago in Northbrook resulting in the death of a child. NO ONE should wish for this in order to save 2 minutes a day.

GVR

Willow Road

November 19, 2010 | 06:42 PM

I believe it is irresponsible for the state of IL to spend \$30+ million at the height of a state budget crisis when we have an option on the table which will reduce congestion for \$6 to \$8 million. Let's get the 3 lane plan completed.

Jim

Widening Willow Road

November 19, 2010 | 10:58 AM

I support a four lane road with additional left turn lanes at traffic light-controlled intersections. One of the choices given in this poll is misleading -- it talks about a five to six lane road, without explaining that two of those lanes are only present as turn lanes at traffic lights, while the rest of the road is four lanes. Those who feel that the only reason for present congestion is left-turners are naive -- the backups are because there is simply too much traffic for a two-lane road. Safety features can be built into a four-lane road that protect children at the school crossings.

Len Rubin

November 19, 2010 | 09:17 AM

I have lived in Northfield for 40 yrs. and do NOT want to see our Village ruined. The state should have put on/off ramps on the Tri-state at Lake and Dundee years ago. IDOT should walk the walk and see how our village operates, not just go along with what they want. This is a community not a means to an end.

Marilynn Johnston

I support the 3 lane plan!

November 19, 2010 | 07:59 AM

I couldn't agree more with my Winnetka, Glenview, and Northbrook friends that Willow road needs to be widened sooner rather than later. That is why I am voting for the 3-lane shovel ready 2005 plan because this alternative: 1) will relieve traffic congestion, 2) could be started immediately--not 5 years from now, and 3) is fiscally responsible --it will save IL over \$30 million dollars when compared to the other suggested IDOT alternatives.

ENK

3-lane Willow Road configuration is best

November 19, 2010 | 06:28 AM

Attending last night's CAG at NTW was enlightening as to local sentiment in Northfield and frustrations by residents of neighboring communities with the process. It really has degenerated into "paralysis by analysis" considering that a shovel-ready 3-lane plan was ready to go in 2005 after 6 years of costly deliberation. Perhaps neighboring communities now want to "get even" with Northfield for the decade of additional delay by using a sympathetic Senator Schoenberg to ram additional lanes into the plan.

But "getting even" should never be a factor planning public improvements that will be affecting the quality of life and property values for generations to come. Three vehicular lanes can be flanked by bike lanes which could also be used by emergency vehicles, and also allows for generous landscaping in place of the dreadful loose shoulders and open culverts now preventing Northfield from putting its best face forward.

Studying additional tollway ramps needlessly drags the process out for many more years and could end up costing more than the \$5 million cost of widening Willow Road to 3 lanes. Property would have to be acquired at each location entailing dislocation of people and disruption of businesses. By contrast, no right-of-way should have to be acquired for modest widening of Willow Road. Improved access to I-94-294 does not address the acute congestion in the Willow Road corridor, which, over the past 50 years has cost the equivalent lifetime of many hundreds of people. At this point Governor Quinn should intercede to approve the 3-lane solution so this project can get rolling by the end of 2011.

Bill Stremmel

4 lanes ASAP

November 18, 2010 | 08:29 PM

A select few Northfield residents are holding surrounding communities hostage. Three lanes will

not change a thing. I drive this road every day and it is almost always bumper to bumper from Sunset Ridge to Happ Rd. The traffic has NOTHING to do with people turning so a turning lane is a waste. As for schools, that is what traffic signals and cross walks are for. If necessary an pedestrian underpass or overpass could be included.

If I were a Northfield resident living on Winnetka Road I would be screaming for the widening of Willow Road. The traffic problems on Willow put a large amount of traffic on the parallel side streets where there are only stop signs and no signals. I would suggest we should be more worried about the situation children face on Winnetka Road!

JimB

Widening Willow Road

November 17, 2010 | 06:01 PM

I support widening Willow Road to at least 4 lanes. Reasons:

1. I have lived in the area since 1984, travel this section of Willow Road frequently, and have see no evidence of children crossing the road being an issue. I suggested to Sen. Schoenberg that cameras be installed at critical locations to monitor crossings to prove or disprove my point.

Secondly, cars turning left are NOT the cause of traffic backing up. Only on rare occasion. Converging 2 lanes into one at each end of the stretch of road in question is the real problem. A fender bender and road rage looking for a place to happen!

KCEmbry