

# Executive Summary

## Overview

The Willow Road Context Sensitive Enhancement Plan has been a positive and productive eleven-month collaboration between the Villages of Northfield and Winnetka, the Willow Road Steering Committee, and the Lakota Group/Christopher Burke Engineering planning and design team. The recommendations in this Enhancement Plan report outline the analysis and public input process, creative design thinking, and opportunities and constraints, culminating in a Context Sensitive Plan for roadway improvements and enhancements to the Willow Road Corridor.

## **Background**

As a major east-west Strategic Regional Arterial roadway (SRA) that passes through the center of the Northfield and Winnetka communities, Willow Road has been a major community character and planning issue for decades. Sponsored by State Senator Schoenberg, this joint effort between Northfield and Winnetka was initiated to study solutions to achieving an improved and enhanced roadway that meets the communities' character goals within the framework of a new Illinois Department of Transportation roadway planning process called Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS). This newly adopted roadway "planning and design" based process stands apart from previous traffic engineering plans and studies by addressing community character and quality of life concerns through encouraging frequent and meaningful communication with area stakeholders to generate a range of solutions with the goal of reaching consensus.

## **Planning Process**

To that end, the two communities formed a Steering Committee, comprised of a core group of leaders from both villages, including representatives from each community's park, school, and other village boards and commissions. The Steering Committee acted as a representative advisory committee that met regularly throughout the process to weigh and evaluate input and ideas from the two communities, evaluate solutions and options, and provide final direction on the preparation of a plan.

Additionally, throughout this process, there were numerous opportunities for various forms of public involvement, including one-on-one and small group interviews, a project e-mail/website link for community-voiced opinions and direct comments to the Steering Committee, and three open Community Workshops. Attendance at these workshops ranged from 90 to 120 participants and the overwhelming majority of these attendants were Northfield residents. These workshop opportunities were vital components to accomplishing a Context Sensitive Solutions based plan.

Public input was crucial to Committee decisions. All the site solutions and enhancements were either public suggestions or ideas brought to the public for their feedback and comment. After the workshops were completed the Committee discussed how to move forward and decided that it should do what it requested of the public, and evaluate the length of the road piece by piece.

## **Guiding Principles**

To guide, focus, and evaluate solutions and ideas throughout this process, the Steering Committee established a set of five fundamental Core Design Principles. These fundamental shared community goals were based on both public input and those goals established as part of the IDOT CSS mission and include:

### Safety

Provide new roadway solutions that are equal to or better than existing vehicular and pedestrian safety conditions.

### Transportation Linkages

Create, enhance and promote safe and secure new and future unified pedestrian and bicycle linkages, routes and crossings.

### Access Points

Provide safe traffic patterns and access to and from adjacent neighborhoods and businesses.

### Environmental Context

Reduce and improve environmental impacts through sound sustainable design and best management practices.

**Open Space**

Enhance area character through aesthetically pleasing landscape solutions and other “green” open space practices.

**A Context Sensitive Approach**

Build upon and more clearly define IDOT’s definition and guiding principles for Context Sensitive Solutions to individual community character, roadway design and planning.

*These values and goals were used as the basis for all Steering Committee review and deliberation as the planning process moved forward into design solutions and roadway improvement and enhancement recommendations.*

**Willow Road Enhancement Plan**

After reviewing numerous roadway/pedestrian design solutions and community character options, a final plan direction was developed. The solutions presented in this report should be viewed as a whole. Independent use of the individual elements could affect the validity of the plan. As safety, especially the safety of school children and pedestrians, is always the number one issue, no combination of site solutions and enhancements should ever be viewed as a trade-off for a less safe road. The Committee incorporated these principles and came up with specific site solutions and

enhancements which include:

- Pedestrian safety enhancements, including delineated crosswalks, pedestrian countdown signal timers, increased pedestrian refuge areas at corners, and protective bollards or barriers at all key intersections.
- Other pedestrian safety enhancements at key locations, such a safe, bright and bicycle-friendly pedestrian underpass connecting Willow Park to Clarkson Park under Willow Road.
- Increased parkway street trees and landscape plantings to both enhance the character of the Corridor and improve the safety and comfort of the pedestrian environment.
- Improved vehicular mobility and safety through the reduction in access points, left turns, and curb cuts; increased length of lane tapers; and the creation of dedicated left turn signals/phases throughout the Corridor.
- The creation of a continuous regional multi-use path network along the length of the Corridor, as well as connections to other pedestrian and bicycle linkages.
- A concept for a consolidated Edens Expressway off-ramp system that would help reduce pedestrian/vehicular conflicts, as well as create the opportunity

for enhanced aesthetics at one of the Village’s main entrance portals.

While the plan attempts to address the majority of issues faced in the Corridor, it does not fully address the issues and concerns for vehicular capacity impacts on pedestrian safety at several key intersections. Several potential roadway plan solutions were studied for these critical intersections and the stretch of roadway between them. More specifically, this critical zone includes the section of road from and inclusive of the Sunset Ridge intersection to and inclusive of the Wagner Road intersection and east to Churchill. Pedestrian safety concerns primarily stemmed from the presence of and both Sunset Ridge and Middlefork Schools and Willow Park.

The only area of significant divergence of public input and Committee consensus was over the issue of the number of lanes between Sunset Ridge Road and the river bridge. The overwhelming majority of the public input favored either a two or three lane road. The safety of local children and the fact that less pavement and lanes are safer was the most cited reason. Other reasons cited were IDOT’s previous approval of a three lane road plan, quality of life issues, and the uniqueness of the road in Northfield with three schools, a church, and big stretches of park district land.

The Committee thought it prudent to study many different roadway lane configurations. All Committee members agreed that pedestrian safety, especially the safety of school-aged children, was paramount to the decision making. The

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majority of the time was spent discussing the two enclosed road configurations. Both configurations have well-defined road edges, have increased mobility, and use the same up-to-date pedestrian safety technology, the only difference being the number of through lanes.

Those members of the Committee who favored a four-lane solution believed that such a solution could be made as safe or safer for pedestrian and vehicular traffic than the present road. The members of the Committee who favored a two or three-lane solution strongly disagreed. There was unanimous agreement that, all else being equal, a two- or three-lane solution was safer for pedestrians than a four-lane solution. The Committee unanimously agreed that if a four-lane road could not be constructed that is safe or safer than the existing road, than the Committee would be opposed to a four-lane road.

It should be noted that these evaluations of safety were based on public input and Committee comments, and not formal safety studies. Before final engineering of this roadway, detailed safety studies need to be completed.

The final Willow Road Enhancement Plan included in this document is intended as a basis, or starting point, for any future engineering studies that are required leading up to construction and implementation. Because the constructed roadway may vary from what is included in this plan, the Committee understands that in their advisory role, this document's value is as a representation of the ideas, thoughts, and discussions of this process. Therefore, while

the document may not contain a consensus plan for the entirety of the Corridor, it does include the shared values, common goals, and design expectations of Northfield and Winnetka that should be addressed in any future plans for Willow Road.