

Council backs post-top traffic signals on Ridge

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Evanston is moving forward on a plan to keep the historic-style post-top traffic signals that residents fought to retain along Ridge Avenue.

With little dissent Monday, Evanston City Council members approved a plan calling for the smaller single-pole lights to remain along Ridge rather than the mast-arm signals that the state and federal governments were mandating as part of a \$1.86 million resurfacing of the street. Residents had rallied behind the post-top signals, saying that the mast-arm lights - which extend over the street - would ruin the aesthetics of Ridge, which runs through a historic district, and were not necessarily safer than the post-top signals.

They received important backing in their fight from the office of U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, a longtime resident on Ridge.

Schakowsky worked to persuade federal officials not to move forward on the mast-arm plan. For the past six months, her office, along with representatives of community groups and the city, has been working on alternatives to the mast-arm system.

In the Section 106 report, staff still maintains there are safety advantages to the mast-arm signals, but agreed that "with the proper design, this alternative is a safe choice that meets all of the original objectives of the project."

The new signals would feature "larger and much more visible lights than the current 8-inch lights used," the various parties said in the report.

In addition, officials said a key component of the deal would be for the state to transfer Ridge to the city's jurisdiction.

The Illinois Department of Transportation "has informed the city that it would approve such a transfer and that if a transfer occurred, it would allow the use of post-top signals ... and would assist the city in seeking funding for the project," officials said.

Staff said the funding level would have to be higher than the \$800,000 figure initially cited by Kirk Brown, IDOT secretary.

However, staff believes that the initial figure used by Brown may have been based on a misreading of city estimates of the work. The figured had applied only to one component.

"The city does not have sufficient local funds to complete this reconstruction work, which is estimated to cost \$4 million," the report said.

Officials said they would accept a transfer provided that IDOT commits in writing to provide funding for the project within the next five years.

Alderman Ann Rainey, 8th Ward, was the lone City Council member to raise concerns about the new direction.

Speaking at the council's Administration and Public Works Committee, Rainey said the move to retain post-top signals would be counterproductive if it meant that more trees would have to be cut down to accommodate the smaller setback.

Residents who say they want post-top signals because the mast-arm type would mar the

canopy of trees now over the street, would be hypocritical, Rainey said, if they then back the removal of trees under the plan.

As for one large tree, at Ridge and Oakton Street, that "tree is not going to go," she said.

Meanwhile, Ridge residents and others saluted the move forward.

"I think everybody feels very good about it (that) we came up with a proposal that everybody can live with," said Vera Chatz, one of the original members of the Ridge neighborhood group that fought to keep the existing signal type.

Chatz and Barbara Gardner, chairwoman of the Evanston Preservation Commission, noted that there is precedent for IDOT changing its stance, citing a move by Michigan Avenue merchants in 1993 in support of keeping post-top lights in that district.