

Officials huddle on Ridge plan 06/13/02

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Representatives from the city participated in a video conference with state and federal officials on Monday about the process that will be used to gather public comments on a controversial traffic-light system planned for Ridge Avenue.

But some residents as well as the office of U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, wondered why they were left out of the picture.

City officials told aldermen Monday that they had participated in a video conference at the Illinois Department of Transportation's District 1 offices in Schaumburg about the state's plan for Ridge that is currently on hold.

City Public Works Director David Jennings said that in addition to city staff, representatives from the Federal Highway Administration and the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency took part in the video conference along with members of IDOT's offices in Springfield and Schaumburg.

The meeting focused on the "Section 106" requirements that call for a public hearing on projects where preservation is concerned, Jennings said.

Residents have raised concerns about the impact of the larger, mast-arm traffic lights on Ridge, which runs through one of the city's main historic preservation districts.

Their protests eventually prompted Jennings and city officials to halt the project to address the preservation issue.

IDOT officials also acknowledged that the Section 106 process had not been adhered to and that a public hearing should be held as part of the process.

Vera Chatz, one of the main spokespersons for the Ridge residents, said she was unaware that the city met with state and federal representatives this week to discuss the process.

"We'd like to see nothing like this happening in the future without the community being involved in the process," she said.

Nadeam Elshami, a spokesman for Schakowsky's office, said the Evanston congresswoman also wants to be involved.

Schakowsky, who lives along Ridge, intervened with federal authorities to see that work was stopped on the project so that residents' concerns can be addressed.

"As the process moves forward, we want to make sure everyone in the community is heard," Elshami said.

Barbara Gardner, chairwoman of the Preservation Commission and a resident on Ridge, said residents should participate in the process if they are going to be expected to abide by its ground rules.

In his short presentation to council members, Jennings said the city will serve as the lead agency on the issue, conducting a public hearing or meeting at some point.

A case report will be prepared on the issue, he said. The report will list alternatives, even those that have been denied to date, he said.

Jennings said representatives from the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency as well as IDOT are to be at the public meeting.

Public comments will then be "addressed and responded to" in a final case report, he said. The final report will be used in drawing up an agreement document with the various agencies, he said.

Officials hope that the process can be completed within two to three months, Jennings said.