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Wyss: Non-dedicated roads pave way to controversy
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Most people probably give little thought to who maintains the roads in front of their homes.

The snow falls; the plows come. Potholes develop; they're filled. Pavement buckles; crews repave. With rare exception, that's how it works along the miles of county, municipal and various township roads within McHenry County.

But for those who live along so-called "private" or non-dedicated roads, maintenance is an expensive nightmare – all the more troublesome because, while these residents pay into township road and bridge levies, they see zero return on their investment within their neighborhoods, members of a non-dedicated road coalition said.

In McHenry Township alone, 29 such subdivisions exist, said John Reihansperger of the Fair Oaks subdivision, off River Road east of McHenry. Algonquin and Nunda townships have similar neighborhoods.

"[Township officials] know something's wrong with this," Reihansperger said. "But they won't do anything about it."

Actually, protocols exist to bring such roadways up to township standards, at which point the township will take them off residents' hands. However, it's expensive, involving ensuring right of way to expand roads to 40 feet and deeding roads to townships. In the oldest areas – many platted as long ago as the 1920s or '30s – road widths are so narrow and the character of neighborhoods so entrenched, widening a road to 40 feet isn't feasible.

Ned Neumann, president of the Country Club subdivision south of McHenry Country Club, said in some cases, plats are hand-written, and deeds for roadways non-existent. It's a condition government allowed nearly 100 years ago, and one that the government of today should grandfather.

"All the non-dedicated road coalition is asking for is, in some form, either through services or through vouchers or through money, to give us our fair share, our 50 percent of our road and bridge tax for the roads that go by our homes," he said.

Highway commissioners in McHenry and Algonquin Township did not return calls Thursday.

However, state Sen. Pamela Althoff, R-McHenry, said she had attempted to assist the non-dedicated road coalition via legislation three years ago. Her proposal would have provided a proportionate share of road and bridge taxes to residents in these subdivisions. It died in committee, she said.

"It's a very difficult issue," she said. "They buy those properties knowing that the road is their responsibility, knowing that what they're buying in part is the land underneath that road. But do I believe there's merit to the position many of these people have? Yes."

It does seem like folks in certain pockets of the county are paying a tax without a proportionate benefit. Oddly, in neighboring Grant Township, it's a non-issue. Many narrow streets long have been a part of the township's 55-mile network.

"Many years ago, even before my time, these roads were brought in, even though they were 20 or 30 feet wide," said Kim Kiesgen, Grant Township highway commissioner for the past 23 years. "It's because [those areas are] so old."

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