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Protesters 'grudgingly' accept new NATO march route

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Organizers of a planned protest during the NATO summit said today they would accept a compromise route that city officials offered in informal negotiations, but only if the city puts the offer in writing by the middle of next week.

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Protest organizer Andy Thayer said the acceptable route for the May 20 march starts at the Petrillo Music Shell, then ventures into the Loop along Jackson Boulevard before heading south to McCormick Place, site of the NATO summit.

Protesters preferred to start their march in Daley Plaza in the Loop rather than at the music shell in Grant Park, which is the city's preferred starting point. The protesters said they would relent on that point because the city's alternative offer lets the parade route to take in more of the Loop, a key demand by protesters.

The city's offer was made during a meeting March 19 after the city had denied the permit for a march starting at Daley Plaza. That permit denial was upheld by an administrative law judge on Thursday.

Michael Simon, assistant commissioner of the Chicago Department of Transportation, testified at an administrative hearing this week that he made the offer to Thayer's group but that he had not vetted it with police officials. Thayer said today his group planned to attend a 2 p.m. meeting with city officials at the CDOT offices.

The route acceptable to the Coalition Against NATO/G-8 War and Poverty Agenda protesters would leave Petrillo Music Shell, head west on Jackson to State Street, south to Harrison Street, east to Michigan Avenue and southward to McCormick Place with a couple more turns along the way.

Thayer and fellow organizer Joe Iosbaker said they would agree to the route, but it needs to be in writing by Wednesday.

"We will accept that, grudgingly, but we will accept it, Thayer said.

Time is of the essence to agree on a route because of planning needs, Iosbaker said.

In opposing the proposed route starting at Daley Plaza, city officials say a large demonstration in the narrower

and more crowded streets of the Loop would pose an unacceptable public safety risk at a time when about 50 foreign delegations are likely to be moving through downtown in heavily guarded motorcades. City lawyers argued earlier this week that demonstrators have a right to march but not a right to cause gridlock in the city.

But protesters, led by Thayer, argued that the city has been inconsistent and disingenuous with its treatment of their permit application. CDOT had earlier approved a permit for an identical march the day before, May 19, when that was going to be the first day of the G-8 summit. But after President Barack moved G-8 to Camp David, Thayer filed a new application to move the parade forward one day.

City officials defended the denial of a permit one day after the date of a granted permit by saying that NATO, which has 28 member countries, would draw more delegations—and more traffic congestion—than G-8, which has just eight members plus a European Union representative. But while G-8 has a shorter membership list, it also draws many more delegations, often between 25 and 40, depending on the agenda.

Because this was to be a double summit, planners have said the Chicago event was to be a very large. And planners have said many of the NATO delegations will already be in town on Saturday.

However, Thayer's lawyers did not spend much time arguing over the size of delegations for the two conferences during their hearing this week, and Administrative Law Judge Raymond J. Prosser sided firmly with the city's contention that the public safety risks of a Sunday march starting at Daley Plaza would be too great.

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