Chicago and Cook County are set to pay a combined $2.5 million to a man who spent more than eight years in prison after he was wrongfully convicted for two rapes at beauty shops on the South Side in 1990.

The City Council's Finance Committee voted unanimously Monday to pay $1.25 million to settle a lawsuit filed by John Willis, who was exonerated through DNA testing and was released from prison in February 1999.

The settlement also hinges on the Cook County Board's approval. The board's Litigation Subcommittee is scheduled to discuss the deal—which would require the county to pay the other $1.25 million—behind closed doors Wednesday.

Willis, now 55 and living in Peoria, was serving a 100-year sentence for two rapes in a series of 10 armed robberies and sexual assaults in the Chatham neighborhood. But DNA testing indicated that the "beauty-shop rapist" responsible for at least one of the two crimes blamed on Willis was Dennis McGruder, who is serving a 40-year prison term for five armed robberies and sexual assaults in 1991 and 1992.

Willis obtained a pardon from then-Gov. George Ryan and filed suit in 2000 against Chicago and the Cook County state's attorney's office. He had sought $8.5 million in damages.

"This settlement will allow John Willis to live comfortably for the rest of his life," said Locke Bowman, one of Willis' attorneys and legal director of the MacArthur Justice Center at the University of Chicago.

The lawsuit alleges that Pamela Fish, then a laboratory analyst in the Chicago Police Department's crime lab, conducted blood tests on semen recovered from a rape scene and determined that Willis was excluded as the source.

But Fish testified that the tests were inconclusive. Her handwritten notes, which showed that Willis could not have been the source of the semen, did not surface until years after Willis was sent to prison, even though his defense attorneys had requested them.

Agreeing to the settlement does not mean the city acknowledges intentional wrongdoing, however, said Chicago police general counsel Sheri Mecklenburg. She was assigned to defend the lawsuit filed by Willis as an assistant corporation counsel for the city and has continued to handle it.

"We don't believe that the city or its employees did anything wrong," Mecklenburg said Monday. "But we do believe that in light of the fact that an innocent man was convicted of crimes that he did not commit, and that the system as a whole failed him, we believe that there is a substantial risk of a significant verdict."
Ald. Edward Burke (14th), the Finance Committee's chairman, predicted a "flood" of similar cases would follow.

Fish, who now works for the Illinois State Police, also was a laboratory technician for Chicago police in the case against the four men who were wrongfully convicted of raping and murdering medical student Lori Roscetti in 1986. The "Roscetti 4" also sued the city, alleging that Fish falsely testified about tests conducted on crime scene evidence.

One of the four, Calvin Ollins, reached a $1.4 million settlement in his civil rights lawsuit against the city (the name as published has been corrected in this text).

Cook County has filed pending motions to dismiss the cases brought by the other three, said Patrick Driscoll, chief of the state's attorney's civil actions bureau.

Willis' suit contends that a county prosecutor "wantonly and maliciously destroyed or hid or failed to preserve or otherwise rendered unavailable evidence that he knew ... would reveal that Mr. Willis was innocent." A slide containing a microscopic bit of DNA was later found, and tests on it exonerated Willis.

Also Monday, the Finance Committee signed off on a $300,000 settlement for the family of a woman killed when she fell off a stretcher and suffered fatal head injuries as paramedics transported her to Loretto Hospital in June 1997.