

Coleman 'Leaning Heavily' Toward Bored I-40 Tunnel

From The Commercial Appeal
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON, April 14. — Transportation Secretary William T. Coleman Jr. is "leaning heavily" toward approving an extremely costly, bored tunnel to carry I-40 under Overton Park in Memphis, administration sources reported Monday.

"Some people think he already has made up his mind," one source said. "I would say that, at the least, he is leaning heavily in that direction."

The only available estimate indicates a bored tunnel would cost \$268.4 million, which would make it by far the most expensive tunnel in the 42,500-mile interstate highway system.

The \$268.4 million estimate is based on the Tennessee Highway Department's estimate last October that a cut-and-cover tunnel would cost \$178.4 million, and the department's 1972 estimate that a bored tunnel would cost \$90 million more than a cut-and-cover tunnel.

The 1.7-mile Eisenhower Tunnel, which carries a two-lane segment of I-70 under the Continental Divide in the Rocky Mountains, is now the most expensive tunnel on the interstate system. It cost \$108 million when it was completed two years ago and took five years to build. A companion two-lane tunnel is being held up in a dispute over its estimated \$116 million cost.

The Memphis project, which would be three lanes in each direction, would be designed to close a 3.7-mile unfinished gap in I-40 but the tunnel itself probably would be no more than one mile in length.

"If Coleman approves a bored tunnel, it may kill the whole project," one source speculated, noting that the state's 10 per cent portion alone would be nearly \$27 million.

In Nashville, state Transportation Commissioner Eddie Shaw wasn't available for comment, but his deputy, William Albert Goodwin, said all he knows is that the U.S. Transportation Department has been studying tunneling methods in other countries.

He speculated that, if the report that the federal agency is leaning toward a

bored tunnel for the Overton Park link, perhaps it is thinking of using techniques developed abroad to bring the cost down.

"We haven't heard anything officially or unofficially," Goodwin said.

Coleman is a key to closing the 3.7-mile gap because federal law requires that the transportation secretary find there is no prudent and feasible alternative and that the design minimizes environmental damage before a federal aid highway may infringe upon a public park.

Rep. Harold Ford of Memphis and Tennessee's two Republican senators, Howard Baker and Bill Brock, all have reported that Coleman is nearing an announcement.

Ford reported last Friday, after at-

tending an NAACP luncheon with Coleman, that Coleman had decided I-40 should be built through the park. Ford said Coleman had not decided on the design.

Two sources who attended a meeting earlier last week with Coleman said at that time he appeared strongly to favor a bored tunnel.

The state long has favored a partially depressed route through the park, the cost of which is estimated at about \$17 million. But Coleman's two predecessors, John A. Volpe and Claude S. Brinegar, earlier rejected that plan.

Volpe, now ambassador to Italy, recently visited here and conferred with Coleman but it has not been learned whether they discussed the Overton Park project.

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