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State Officials Reject Adams' Offer to OK Tunnel Plan for I-40

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State transportation officials today rejected U.S. Transportation Secretary Brock Adams' apparent decision to allow construction of an Interstate 40 tunnel under Overton Park, saying the tunnel route would be too expensive to build and maintain.

Adams, appearing before a Senate Public Works subcommittee yesterday in Washington, apparently reversed his week-old decision in the Overton Park case which barred the state from completing the interstate through the park by any means.

Adams seemed to indicate to committee members yesterday that he would approve a cut-and-cover tunnel to carry I-40 under Overton Park.

After hearing Adams' statement, a spokesman for the state transportation department said the cost for the tunnelled highway would be four times that for a sunken plaza design, which Adams rejected last week.

The spokesman, Paul Allen, said Transportation Commissioner Eddie Shaw did not take the tunnel plan to Adams because "he just didn't want to spend that much money on one mile of roadway."

When Adams rejected the state's pro-

posal last week, he indicated that the department was through with considerations of projects for running the highway through Overton Park.

Adams, responding to questions from Sen. Howard Baker, R-Tenn., said at the hearing yesterday that he believed the state's plan for a depressed roadway covered at intervals by plazas was not prudent, but he would consider approving a tunnel route under the park.

"If they want to come in and tunnel that park and stay within that busway and ventilate it, then that project can be built," Adams said.

Adams also said he would go along with the wishes of Congress if it legislated a referendum for the citizens of Shelby County to decide the issue.

Gov. Ray Blanton has scoffed at any tunnel plans because of the construction and maintenance costs. He has said that drainage problems would cause a tunnelled highway to become "the world's longest swimming pool."

"The problem with that (the tunnel route) is that it would cost \$114 million," Allen said, "which is four times the cost of our plan (the plaza design)."

And he said a tunnel would cost as much

as \$3 million a year to maintain.

Adams, himself, explained his earlier failure to consider the tunnel route. He said the tunnel design "would cost well over \$100 million — the estimates vary between \$100 million and \$178 million — and I did not feel that since the State of Tennessee had indicated it did not want to go into that kind of project, I ought to be telling them what they should do with it."

Opponents of completing the interstate through Overton Park by any means were strong in their reaction to Adams' statement.

Charles Newman, attorney for Citizens for the Preservation of Overton Park, the group which has led the legal battle against the park expressway route, said Adams statement was "much ado about nothing."

"The decision which Secretary Adams officially announced a week ago is not affected in any way by the remarks which he reportedly made to Sen. Baker yesterday," Newman said.

"There's no chance whatever in my opinion that any proposal to use any portion of the park regardless of the design, will

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State Says Tunnel Under Park Would Be Too Expensive

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ever be approved by the secretary of transportation and continued attempts to get such approval will only result in more unnecessary delay and expense in the resolution of this matter."

Newman said "the last four and a half years have been wasted in efforts to evade that reality. It would be a great disservice to the community for the state highway department to waste more time in similar attempts to avoid the reality of Adams decision."

Memphis Public Works director Frank Palumbo also downplayed the renewal of the tunnel route.

"Economically, that is not what in engineering would be considered feasible for the miles involved," he said. "There is an economic limit to what one can place on the environment."

The cost of tunneling under the park ranges from \$114 to \$300 million compared to \$28 to \$32 million for the plan which Adams turned down, Palumbo said.

"It sounds like Adams is being guided by suggestions from secretaries which previously headed that department," Palumbo said. "Tunneling under Overton Park is surely one way of finishing I-40, but is that real estate and the growth above it that valuable?"

"If a vote was taken on I-40, I think you would find a very mere minority opposed to running it through the park," Palumbo said.

During the hearing yesterday, Adams, under pressure from Baker, said he would meet with Tennesseans in an effort to close the Overton Park link in Interstate 40. No time or meeting place was set, however.

"The people of Tennessee are tired of the federal government diddling around with them," the Tennessee Republican said.

The 3.7-mile Overton Park link is the only uncompleted portion of I-40 between Asheville, N.C., and New Mexico.

Environmentalists have been fighting highway encroachment into the big mid-

town park for 22 years, and have won numerous court decisions.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. Secretary of Transportation should hold hearings into the question of whether there were prudent and feasible alternates for the highway, four successive secretaries have ruled against the plan.

During the hearing yesterday, Baker accused Adams of failing to provide leadership in the Overton Park issue.

He asked Adams to help find a solution. "I mean you ought to assert some leadership," Baker said.

Baker and state officials last week criticized Adams for not suggesting an alternative plan for completing the missing interstate segment.

The state plan rejected by Adams called for a partially depressed, 4,200-foot roadway through the wooded park to complete the missing I-40 link. The plan called for landscaped plazas to crisscross the highway at intervals, in an effort to appease environmentalists.

Adams said Sept. 30 he rejected the plaza design because it conflicted with standards set out by the U.S. Supreme Court in an environmentalists' challenge of the highway plans.