

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

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Expressway Overkill?

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MAYOR WYETH CHANDLER said of the newest plan to improve the flow of east-west traffic through the city, "We think this does the least harm to the environment, the least harm to our citizens." His sensitivity to the environmental and human factors in this old issue is commendable, but is there an even better way?

Details of the city's proposal to make the most efficient use of the remnants of Interstate 40 ask more questions than they answer.

- Are we trying to build an elaborate imaginary expressway? If not, why is it necessary to move traffic on and off the interstate stubs with an expensive spaghetti of elevated roads and "interchanges"?

- What is the purpose of the plan? To the extent that it would carry interstate travelers through the city, it would succeed in flooding Midtown. If this is to expedite local traffic only, as is necessary and proper, aren't there simpler, less costly solutions? Or is something sexy desired as a sales tool for undeveloped suburban lands hugging the eastern leg of I-40? Is it smart to encourage that — wittingly or otherwise — with gasoline headed toward \$2 a gallon?

- Is this the same traditional thinking and urban myopia that has had this community hung up too long on I-40? Is this a real alternative or just as close as we can come to the original?

- Is this the highest and best use of a potential \$220-million windfall in federal funds which the city would be eligible for once the old I-40 route is abandoned? The estimated \$25 million to \$30 million required for this plan would take a big chunk of that money. Could it actually improve the environment and help more people if put to use to serve the larger and longer range needs of transportation?

THERE ARE SOME good things in the mayor's suggestions. We are particularly impressed by his call to make the cleared property along the I-40 right-of-way available for a small park and new single-family homes. That would strengthen the neighborhood and stronger neighborhoods, especially in the inner city, will be a powerful anchor against the economic tides of the 80s.

It also makes sense to spend some of the federal money to buy new buses for the transit authority and to help develop sites for park-and-ride transit facilities.

And we're glad that Chandler is consulting on all this with a broadly representative group of community interests. That's how local government is supposed to work.

But what we have been served up so far smacks of trying to catch up to the city's

present traffic demands with overkill. And what seems to be missing is the kind of innovative thinking that might move Memphis ahead of its overall transportation needs and the times.

Two hundred twenty million dollars (\$260 million with the necessary matching funds) might, for example, develop a rapid rail system along the Southern corridor that could solve a lot more traffic problems than encouraging more travel by private cars. So might special bus lanes or a faster expansion of modern traffic signalization equipment.

It seems shortsighted and perhaps even wasteful to talk of using these funds for street improvements when that is part of the normal, routine work of city government. This is not a normal or routine opportunity and these are not normal or routine times.

