

CITIZENS TO PRESERVE OVERTON PARK  
Memphis, Tennessee

192 Williford Street  
June 18, 1965

Hunter Lane, Jr., Commissioner  
City of Memphis, Public Service  
97 North Third Street  
Memphis, Tennessee

Dear Mr. Lane:

Your letter of May 25, has brought numerous telephone calls to us requesting that we reply to the points made by you. Since they continue, we are complying. We regret that it is long and tedious, but the subject-matter - Overton Park versus an Interstate expressway - is of tremendous importance to the whole community and requires many angles of thought. We ask that you give further thought to this most urgent and vital matter, especially since it concerns one of the city's most famous assets. (Incidentally, did you know that almost two pages is given to Memphis in a history book on Tennessee? Parks and the men who have made Memphis great received most of the attention. John Overton was one of the men named. Overton Park was given a full separate page.)

We shall follow the sequence of your letter. Thank you for your appreciation of our efforts and writing us.

Page 1, paragraph 2: You mention spending "many joyful Saturdays and Sundays" with your family by the lake and at the zoo. Are you aware that part of Rainbow Lake is in the path of the expressway? Construction could eliminate it. If any of it is saved the remaining character - the "joy" and beauty of it - will be lost at the foot of the expressway shoulders or wall with the roar of Memphis and interstate traffic.

Page 1, paragraph 3: Justification of our stand is based on not only our knowledgeable perceptions and information in light of other highway constructions, but on statements of national authorities such as the President of the United States, the Secretary of the Interior, and others.

President Johnson has proclaimed his Great Society, "and part of the Great Society is to preserve open urban spaces." He states, (printed in House Document #78, February 8, 1965)

"Our task is to insure that roads themselves are not destructive of nature and natural beauty."

"Beauty is not an easy thing to measure.....It is one of the most important components of our true national income, not to be left out simply because staticians cannot calculate its worth."

"A growing population is swallowing up areas of natural beauty.... and is placing increased demands on our overburdened areas of recreation."

Secretary of the Interior, Stewart L. Udall, is reported by Mr. Edward J. Moeman to have said, in effect, at the President's White House Conference on Natural Beauty of America, that he is opposed to highways going through all parks. On May 1, 1965, Secretary Udall urged the National Association

of Trial Lawyers in Washington "to appoint yourselves as guardians of your grandchildren yet unborn in the matter of preserving America's natural resources..... You need to provide spirited, informed, and intelligent opposition to shortsightedness, greed and folly....."

Alfred B. LaGasse, Executive Director, American Institute of Park Executives, Inc., said in a letter to us, April 29, 1965, "I am familiar with Overton Park. It is indeed a unique facility and opportunity for the citizens of Memphis, Tennessee, and it would be a desecration of the character of the mid-city should it be bisected by the proposed interstate highway."

Michael Fromme, writing in the May 1, 1965, issue of "Woman's Day" says, "The illusion of land abundance may linger on but the truth is that suddenly it is gone.....The time of endless open space of unconquered beauty, is done....The cities have been littered to such an extent that in one month of clean-up on Chicago's freeways, 1500 tons of debris are collected....." "Why is it important to safeguard beauty? Because ugliness.....promotes disorder and ultimately decay.....It breeds contempt for law, juvenile delinquency and all assorted ailments that beset modern society. Ugliness is sometimes profitable for those who believe in serving their own time on earth only; or as Mark Twain's judge told the American before him, "You are from a land where any insolent that wants to is privileged to profane and insult nature, and through her, nature's God, if by so doing he can put a sordid penny in his pocket."

We ask, were the above factors included in your "weighing all factors and arriving at a decision which is of optimum benefit to the whole community" ?

Page 2, point 1: The building of the circumferential route first: How many different engineering firms submitted "traffic engineering projections" for the routing of the east-west expressway? Are these other firms known to the people? There has been some question from time to time on the figures supporting the routing of Interstate 40. Lay people and some engineers contend that Memphis' now improved streets will carry traffic, particularly if opened for traffic to flow, and not obstructed with parked cars.

Have you studied a report of "Memphis Expressways" given some years ago by Mr. Frank Ragsdale of the Memphis Transit Authority? With the current studies of Land Usage in Memphis and Shelby County, which includes traffic, we believe that it might be well to defer an absolute conclusion of the location of Interstate 40 until this study is completed in January 1967.

What is wrong about building, at once, the Interstate 240 (northern route)? If traffic is so congested, and the Interstate highways are needed, surely building I-240 would help to relieve "congestion". It parallels I-40 and joins the same interchange to cross the new bridge as I-40. Highway Commissioner Pack has given us no reason for not building it first. It just was not "scheduled" that way.

We concur in preparing for the "population explosion". This preparation for it cannot be limited to traffic, only. We hope that you will concur with us and recognized authorities on the even greater need for public parks, especially those with remnants of natural areas. Every inch now in existence is needed, and exactly where they are! The "Population Explosion" and increased Apartment House Living demands all of Overton Park be preserved -

- no land to be taken or sold.

Page 2, Point 2 - Costs: We refer you to our above quotations from President Johnson and Mr. Michael Fromme; to Stewart Udall's book, "The Quiet Crisis" in which he speaks of the increased value of the Central Park property in New York because it was kept a park in the past one hundred years. "Central Park is worth billions today. Much of its value lies in its ad valorem of surrounding property." (This, if you want to talk dollars and cents).

When the highway department figured the cost of the Overton Park route as lower than others, what was their figure for Overton Park land? Was the figure based on the "ad valorem of surrounding property" ? What is the value of this property? If it is higher than Overton Park property, and using the basis of evaluating Central Park property, why is Overton Park route for the highway cheaper in dollars and cents? (The State Highway Department insists that alternate routes north or south of the present plan would cost more.) What is the state highway planning to pay? Did they evaluate Overton Park land, truly, or will the city - the people - be short-changed, dollar-wise? How are the so-called "costs" established? Captain Tom Meanley's letter and recommendation discusses this very point. (Press-Scimitar June 15, 1965)

How many different engineering consultants submitted cost figures? Who were they? How thoroughly were the social costs of the expressway through Overton Park considered? How many sociologists and psychologists have been employed as consultants in estimating the costs of this route and who were they?

The reprint from the Chamber of Commerce Business on "Status of Expressways", May 10, 1965, Press-Scimitar, indicated the I-240 to be cheaper in dollars. Would not this be an argument to get on with the building of it as soon as possible?

Regarding "hardship" to Southwestern, The First Baptist Church, as well as, a number of owners of "expensive homes", have you talked with Dr. Caudill, Minister, First Baptist Church, recently?

Page 2, Point 3: The word, "destroy", you say, is exaggerated. We refer you to the President of United States, who said, "A modern highway may wipe out the equivalent of a 50-acre park with every mile. This likely does not include a cloverleaf or diamond interchange which would increase the acreage to be removed from Overton Park. Surely elimination of the most wooded and most used parts of the park will destroy the Overton Park we know and use today. Just strips of green will remain in a changed environment. Have you seen the engineers' real working plans?

Another comment on "destroy": From the Citizens Committee on Natural Resources, a national conservation organization in Washington, ".....if this park is destroyed, as it would be if the expressway was located through it;...." (June 10, 1965)

Did you know that Overton Park was introduced into the discussions of the White House Conference on May 24 and 25? It is being used as a case in point of what is happening to public parks in the highway building programs. The eyes of the nation are on Memphis and what happens to Overton Park.

Page 3, paragraph 1, on the "increased usage of parks" after expressways were built in them: Overton Park will be far less accessible with the

Interstate 40 in it. There will be no egress or ingress in the park. Some of the entrances now existing will be eliminated due to engineering of the expressway. Accessibility now is the maximum anywhere. It is surrounded by three six-lane streets and highways and a fourth good street carrying traffic directly and naturally into the many easy entrances on the level.

Have you talked recently to Mr. Hal S. Lewis and to Captain Tom Meanley on usages and accessibility of the parks in other cities you mentioned - Houston and San Diego?

Page 3, paragraph 2: It is good for the City Commission to be planning and creating "badly-needed parks in the eastern and southern parts of the city", but not with funds from the sale of Overton Park land! The President of the United States said, "establish more parks." He did not intend this to be at the sacrifice of already established parks; he meant in addition to already existing park land, every part now used to be saved for use as it is. How could you endorse taking away something which is used to the extent Overton Park is used? Tearing up the remainder of the park after the expressway is built to add parking places is not keeping the character of even the remnant of Overton Park which will remain. The whole of the park is needed where it is. Its location cannot be replaced. This is its uniqueness, to say nothing of, its woodland and the bit of "wilderness" in mid-city.

Page 3, point 4, paragraph 2: On the matter of "the present and past City Commissioners standing firm behind the proposed route", we refer you to our file wherein conflicting statements have been made. We are puzzled over your word "firm". Some past commissioners have opposed the route. One city commissioner has told us that a city commission voted unanimously opposing the route through the Park at a public hearing. We called your attention to this at the City Commission meeting of April 20, 1965, when Dr. Arlo I. Smith spoke for this group - Citizens To Preserve Overton Park.

We are calling your attention to cities preserving their parks and green spaces, and trees, particularly those which are unusual. San Francisco is now trying to preserve Golden Gate Park from a freeway. The First proposal in the '50's was defeated by a vigorous Park Commission Director who said, "We are at the cross-roads; the city can remain desirable or become a dump. He got action." The expressway was Not built through the Park. The Board of Supervisors, the governing body of San Francisco and county, recently rejected another proposed freeway. (This information is of May 18, 1965, in a letter.)

In Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Sycamores on Memorial Drive along the Charles River were threatened last year by underpasses and overpasses. (Legislation had been passed for these in 1961.) But the whole community protested. Now, a new Commissioner is re-studying the proposed plans and the view of the protesters to the construction which would destroy this unusual stand of plane trees and green space. The view of the protesters, the preserves of natural beauty spots, is that the underpasses and overpasses "are unneeded from a traffic standpoint, and unjustified from an aesthetic standpoint." (quoted from Harvard Alumni Bulletin, May 1965)

Page 3, point 4, paragraph 1: Will you reconsider your point of view after reading the statements made in this letter by other citizens and authorities in our country, and use, what you have called, "undeniably the weight of their offices (local city officials) to influence state and federal officials as to expressway routing"?

Commissioner Hunter Lane, Jr.

6-18-65

Will you re-examine the conclusions in your letter to us since you know that the eyes of the nation are on Memphis and Overton Park, and that it may be used as a case in point for legislation to preserve such areas from being decimated by highways? The City Commission and Memphis and Shelby County Commission will want to preserve this park in consideration of the total environment and needs of Memphis, especially since it is becoming a "national symbol", using the words of Mr. Edward J. Meeman, Conservation Editor of the Scripps-Howard newspapers.

Sincerely yours,

CITIZENS TO PRESERVE OVERTON PARK

*Florence Stoner*

Secretary, Mrs. Floyd F. Stoner

*Arlo J. Smith, Chrm.*

P.S. -

Preserving Overton Park from expressways and man-made constructions is as much an essential part of fostering and offering art to the community as erecting buildings to house man-made art forms.

Overton Park is Nature's art form - no man can re-construct it. Students may receive inspiration and strength for their life work there.