

CA 2-11-69

A very confusing article - for the people - states truths about the bad features of I-40 plan; then proceeds to push for it anyway!!

# Park Route's Up-Or-Down Issue:

*"This is urban suicide . . . Unless these (urban freeway) policies are changed, the American city cannot much longer remain a coherent place to live or work."*  
—George Kassabaum.

## Whose Decision?

Who should decide how and where expressways should be built through the nation's cities?

At present, state highway departments decide. Engineers, with mountains of traffic-flow charts, map out the straightest, cheapest freeways to accommodate the endless line of cars expected in 1990 or beyond.

The interstate highway program has inflicted serious damage on many American cities. We are now at a point of crisis. This is urban suicide," the president of the American Institute of Architects says.

George E. Kassabaum, AIA's president and a leading St. Louis architect, is one of many people in high

places across the country — mayors, city councils members, state highway commissioners, federal highway administrators, university sociologists and psychologists studying the urban scene — who are beginning to question whether the cheapest, straightest and simplest expressway route is always the best.

The question is demanding an answer in Memphis — not just talk.

In Overton Park's 342 shady acres, the question boils down to a choice that is about to be made: Depress the expressway portion through the park, or build it at surface level.

For depressing it: The

City Council and former federal highway administrator Lowell Bridwell, now out of office.

For building at surface: The Tennessee Highway Department, Mayor Henry Loeb, City Engineer Tom Maxson and, apparently, federal highway administrator-designate Francis Turner.

Considerable pressure is now being mounted to go

ahead with blueprinted designs dated 1967 to build at the surface level. And it is widely believed in pro-surface circles that those wanting a depressed freeway to minimize road noises in the park, as well as the Memphis public generally, are simply tiring of the park struggle of 15 years.

The idea of depressing the park portion of the expressway dates back to last spring when federal administrator Bridwell — after a trip to Memphis — ruled the freeway must go through the park. But he added an unexpected suggestion that state highway engineers use a depressed design, a proviso not well accepted in Nashville.

State Highway Commissioner Charles Speight decided two weeks ago to stop expressway work and see what the Nixon administration's view would be. "Any engineer that would recommend we build that monstrosity (a depressed freeway across the park) ought to have his head examined," he said.

City engineer Maxson has cited two points against the idea — overall, it would cost 4.5 million dollars more because of depressed drainage construction required by Lick Creek running through the park and, as well, a required syphon-and-pump system could malfunction ("and one time or another, it will," says Mr. Speight) and flood the high-speed traffic artery.

"That's a big creek," says the state highway chief. "And everything in the park would drain into that big hole in the ground. I don't want to put my name on something that just won't work."

Last week, the mayor dispatched Mr. Maxson and Public Works Director Charles Blackburn to Washington where they were joined by state highway officials to see the federal administrator-to-be. They heard what they thought they would hear.

"It would be a good deal cheaper (to build at the surface) than to depress the expressway through the park," said Mr. Turner, who has no power until he is officially appointed and confirmed.

Mayor Loeb's position has never changed. He favored going through the park a year ago when that was open to question. Yesterday he said: "I'd like to see it built as drawn — without further delay and without changes (to depress it). The time for action is now — it's time to get this system completed."

The state highway chief says he has a City Council resolution adopted last April saying it wants freeway construction to proceed "as presently planned," and knows of no conflict between the state Highway Department and the council. "I don't know if it's necessary that we talk to the council. We have a resolution from them accepting our route and design."

Mrs. Gwen Awsumb says last year's resolution was adopted with the understanding that Mr. Bridwell's "depress-it" suggestion would be followed. "That certainly was my understanding."

To be certain the state understands the council's position, Councilman Downing Pryor introduced and gained adoption of a second resolution last Tuesday backing a depressed design "sufficiently deep to keep trucks and other motor vehicles below the natural ground level" so as to be unseen by park visitors.

"The only thing these engineers can think of when they

build a highway is to make it straight and flat," Mr. Pryor snaps.

Just this sort of conflict is going on in many American cities.

"We are all car owners and highway users, but we don't want them destroying our front lawns and the character of our communities," says architect Kassabaum.

At present, the state highway departments of the nation do the highway planning. Eventually, if a mutually acceptable solution cannot be found, the City Council will have to abide by the state highway decision — which could also be an indefinite postponement.

In its design study, the AIA, along with other groups, suggests "design review committees . . . that include engineers, planners, architects, social scientists, local public officials and individual citizens."

In Baltimore, a team of federally backed planners that even included a psychologist has persuaded officials to consider alternatives to a freeway route, previously deemed immovable, that would slice a neighborhood in half. Another design team is at work on an old freeway dispute in Chicago.

The AIA official asks, why should expressway land bought by the state remain largely vacant except for its concrete strips? Why cannot buildings be planned to straddle and wrap-around our expressways attractively? The city would then gain taxable land and buildings instead of losing it to expressways, he says.

The key, of course, is control of the money. All federal gasoline taxes now by law must go to state highway departments for highway building — even if a city wants some other transit system.

"Highways, expressways are, in effect, free. However, if a city wishes a subway, it must have a referendum in which its citizens vote to tax themselves for that privilege," Mr. Kassabaum points out. Only Congress can change that.

How True!

along?

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