

# THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

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## Park Route Still Best

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO last week the old Memphis City Commission approved an interstate highway route through Overton Park. It seems hard to believe that next Thursday at 10 a.m. in the City Council chamber a hearing is scheduled to permit the public to argue the pros and cons of the park route for I-40.

But it is true. What has been hashed and rehashed so many times must be reconsidered because a federal court sent the matter back to the Department of Transportation which then decided this procedure is necessary to conform to the 1970 National Environmental Protection Act.

This is what John Volpe, head of the federal Department of Transportation, has been in the process of doing since the court ruling last January. Last June he told a group of Memphians headed by Mayor Wyeth Chandler and interested in getting the I-40 link completed through Overton Park that he hoped to reach a decision on the matter by mid-October. But to meet requirements of a law which was passed after the park right-of-way was bought by the State of Tennessee, this week's hearing is an important step in establishing that the park route is the most feasible and prudent.

THE CITIZENS to Preserve Overton Park, an incorporated group which has led the court battle against the route preferred by highway engineers, will be there this week. But so will many of the proponents. And they make an impressive list.

One of the questions Volpe has to decide is whether the affected community feels a parkland expressway route would be detrimental to the environment. For the record it should be noted that over recent years and up to today the park plan has been endorsed by the old City Commission, the modern City Council, Mayor Chandler and former Mayor Henry Loeb, the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Association, Future Memphis, top state and federal officials, City Beautiful, the Mississippi-Arkansas-Tennessee Council of Governments (MATCOG), the Memphis Community Relations Commission, the Council of Civic Clubs, Representative Dan Kuykendall, the Kiwanis Club — and others.

This newspaper has supported the Overton Park route since the first consideration was given to it and to alternatives. We endorsed it at the time of hearings in March, 1961. We backed it again as hearings were held in 1968. We still do.

The Citizens to Preserve Overton Park have succeeded in delaying construction of the park leg of I-40 on the legal technicality that the government's decision was based on an incomplete administrative record. The opponents' arguments against the route itself

have been patiently examined over the years by the state Highway Department and the federal Bureau of Roads, and rejected.

After re-examination of the matter, the Bureau of Roads reaffirmed federal approval of the park plan on Jan. 17, 1966. Still later, it was reconfirmed by the new Department of Transportation on April 19, 1968.

That action by Lowell Bridwell, then federal highway administrator, was said to be final.

But "final" has been a mistreated word where this piece of pavement is concerned. Remember back in January, 1966, when David Pack, who was then Tennessee highway commissioner, said the park location was "final"? Remember a year later, on Feb. 3, 1967, when the late Gov. Buford Ellington and his highway commissioner, Charles Speight, proclaimed that the park "is the only feasible location for the highway" and said this was their "final decision"?

IN GOOD FAITH, city, state and federal highway engineers continued to revise design of the roadway to minimize its effects on the park environment. On Nov. 5, 1969, the state paid the City of Memphis \$2,200,000 for a 4,200-foot-long right-of-way through Overton Park. That took away 26 out of 342 acres — actually only 21 if the existing bus lanes are not counted. Since then the city has spent about half of the state purchase money to acquire some 44 acres of new park space, much of that for newer parts of Memphis.

Meanwhile, the adjacent neighborhoods east and west of Overton Park have been drastically changed. On right-of-way which once was private property, but now has been cleared by bulldozers, there once were 408 single family residences, 84 duplexes, 266 apartments, 44 businesses, five churches, and one fire station (now rebuilt in the park). More than 2,200 people were displaced — an action which would have to be repeated on about the same scale should an alternative route be chosen.

It is impossible to estimate the cost of years of delay. Certainly the \$5,300,000 construction contract let in 1970 would not compare with today's inflated prices. No one knows what it has cost downtown Memphis, which has withered while waiting.

THE NEED FOR the east-west expressway, linked with the new I-40 bridge, has been long established. Alternatives to the park have been conscientiously studied and restudied.

It remains the best plan. Hopefully the Thursday hearing, with a followup Friday if extra time is needed, will once more convince the Department of Transportation to uphold past decisions — this time within the letter of the environmental law.

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