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Find A Way To Link I-40

TRANSPORTATION Secretary John Volpe's rejection of the Overton Park expressway, in the form proposed, is a deep disappointment. But it does not alter the need to find a way to complete the midcity link in Interstate 40, and to do it soon.

Volpe, who approved the park route in 1969, emphasized that in rejecting it now he was compelled by two forces—Congress, which has since passed an environmental protection law which is retroactive, and the Supreme Court, whose recent decisions have stopped other federally financed highways through parks.

The fundamental issue in the Overton Park lawsuit, of course, centered on what the court cited as Volpe's failure to make his previous decision on the basis of a full record concerning all feasible alternatives. He had the comprehensive record this time, but reversed himself on the presumption that approval would not stand up in federal court—which was something of a pre-judgment of the case with a defeatist attitude.

BUT VOLPE HAS made his decision, and Volpe is leaving office, with Claude Brinegar as his successor. And unless the State of Tennessee proceeds through a whole new submission of the Overton Park plan the matter has been removed from Brinegar's desk.

While being careful not to commit the Department of Transportation to any I-40 alternatives, some of them were mentioned by Volpe. The thing to remember is that all of them have been carefully scrutinized before, and the highway planners always have come back to the Overton Park route as the one which makes most sense.

A change to the Louisville & Nashville corridor would inconvenience far more people than the park route. Completion of the northern perimeter of Interstate 240 will provide some relief, but it is designed to be a tributary of I-40, not a substitute for a direct east-

west expressway. Volpe notes that a tunnel design for the Overton Park route "would be less harmful," leaving that as another "possible alternative." Engineers have considered that, too, but felt the cost (estimated at more than 59 million dollars for a 4,200-foot stretch) was prohibitive. Since the courts have held that cost is not a factor to be considered in dealing with a case such as this, that could be a way to proceed.

But the state and the City of Memphis also ought to seriously consider another possibility—that of building a six-lane boulevard along the Overton Park route without federal funds, and without designating it as a part of Interstate 40. Tennessee already owns the entire right-of-way, including the section in the park, and houses and other buildings on the approaches have long since been torn down. The engineering has been done. All that is needed is to do the grading and paving.

JOHN VOLPE'S farewell act of office is a sad setback for Memphis. But it cannot be accepted as the end of the effort to complete the east-west expressway.

The citizens of Memphis need this highway badly, and its completion is long overdue.

Whatever the alternative to the plan rejected by Volpe may turn out to be, it should be found quickly. The approaching completion of the I-40 bridge across the Mississippi River makes the need for building this last short connection even more imperative.

There may be a better or more practical way than assuming total financing on a state-local basis, or than seeking 90 per cent federal financing for a park tunnel. If there is, now is the time to let it be heard.

Interstate 40 climbs mountains and crosses rivers and plains coast to coast.

This short segment cannot be left unfinished.