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It's The State's Turn In Expressway Game

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Since January, when former Transportation Secretary John Volpe ruled a partially depressed routing of Interstate 40 through Overton Park was environmentally unacceptable, all progress has been circular.

And the rift that had pitted highway agencies, both federal and state, against environmentalists is now opening between the transportation agencies themselves, with the environmentalists on the sidelines.

Federal authorities, through an "informal suggestion," have begun

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indicating the state's best course of action may be to fall back to a "cut and cover" tunneling of the interstate segment through the park.

And the state, which rejected that design years and \$14 million ago, apparently is content to await results of its federal court suit. The suit, in effect, asks new Transportation Secretary Claude Brinegar to reconsider the partially depressed route and, if it is still found wanting, to designate a specific alternative.

The only area of agreement state and federal transportation authorities have been able to find since the January decision is that the disputed 3.7 miles of highway should, in one form or another, go through Overton Park. Both say going either north or south of parkland is not feasible.

"There are four (transpark) designs that are possible—a depressed route, a platform tunnel which would be a cut with partial cover, cut-and-cover or a bored tunnel," a Federal Highway Administration spokesman said. "It is up to the state to present us with a specific proposal."

Sen. William Brock (R-Tenn.) agreed "The ball is in the state's court. The state is required to submit a plan before the federal government can do anything."

Brock said federal officials have advised him they are ready to move as soon as the state submits a plan.

"Time is important," Brock added. "We must get off of dead center. The city is choking with traffic and it is getting worse. We can't tolerate a non-decision."

State Transportation Commissioner Robert Smith, meanwhile, says he still has "some optimism" that the presently planned, partially depressed roadway may ultimately be approved through litigation within the federal courts.

And a tunnel he said, may be out of the question since there is a possibility that insurmountable water problems may be encountered in the park.

At stake between the two proposals is

50 million dollars, 90 per cent of it federal monies. Neither the state nor the federal government has a design and estimates are that it would require a year or more to design an underground structure and an additional two years to construct it.

Meanwhile, the expresswayless park is about the only barrier remaining to a motorist being able to drive on interstate 40 from Arkansas to Knoxville.

A mere 3.7 miles — about 4,000 feet of it through the park — is not under contract. The rest of the link on the western side, including the new Mississippi River Bridge, is expected to be complete to Claybrook by July or August. On the eastern side of the park, the expressway is complete from Bon Air to Knoxville.

The state has acquired all the needed rights-of-way for the park link and completed engineering, utility adjustments and related expenses at a cost of \$14 million. Actual construction of the partially depressed design would cost somewhat less than has already been spent.

A curious aspect of the prevailing situation is that Norbert Tiemann, head of the Federal Highway Administration, made an unannounced visit to Memphis last week with aides for an on-site inspection and concluded the park route is the only feasible one.

He did so — to the puzzlement of state officials — without inviting Smith or any other Tennesseans to go along.

After the inspection trip, Tiemann carefully avoided stating a preference for design but gave cost figures on the depressed route (\$7 million), a cut-and-cover tunnel; (\$57 million) and a bored tunnel (\$147 million).

Cost of another area of possible compromise, a platform tunnel, would fall somewhere between \$7 and \$57 million. It would, if found environmentally sound, be a hybrid between partially depress and 'cut-and-cover.'

State highway officials in Nashville, meanwhile, say they've had no official communications with federal authorities.

One state highway official speculated privately that the "informal suggestion" may be Washington's way of letting the state know it might be well to revise its proposal to a cut-and-cover design, which would add about 50 million dollars to the cost.

The episode already has strained relations, a state political official said.

So, in some respects, there's not much difference between the current lack of communication and that which prevailed 18 years ago when the controversy then began between road builders and conservationists who objected to the overland park route.

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