



Contested plans call for a six-lane interstate to replace this bus route through Overton Park.

Collision Course: I-40 Vs. Overton Park

Environmentalists in Memphis are pitted against advocates of an urban interstate highway.

by TOM ADKINSON

The fussing and fighting over an urban expressway in Memphis began almost 20 years ago. Bad feelings persist, and the root of the controversy still is intact. It is Overton Park, 342 acres of what has been called "one of the country's finest city forest parks." Almost nobody is happy.

Plans call for a loop roadway around the city, with Interstate 40 cutting through the middle. The southern loop is complete, and I-40 protrudes inside the loop from the east and dead-ends. It points directly at Overton Park and resumes less than 4 miles away. Someday I-40 will stretch from North Carolina to California.

The threatened Overton Park is far from usual. In it are the municipal zoo—well known for breeding rare species—a lake, the Brooks Art Gallery, a bandshell, a nine-hole golf course, picnic sites, a wading pool, athletic fields, and 170 acres of oak-hickory climax forest. It has taken several hundred years for the forest to reach this state.

A lane about 25 feet wide exclusively for city buses now runs through the forest and directly along the zoo boundary. The expressway would follow this route—six lanes wide—severing the zoo from the rest of the park and covering 26 acres. It would be from 200 to 250 feet wide for almost a mile and widen

to almost twice that width for a ramp at the park's eastern edge.

The character of the park, and especially the forest, undoubtedly would be altered by the highway. Now the forest is big enough to attract many species of migratory birds, an urban oddity. City noises fade away as you walk the Overton Park Zoological Trail. The trail crosses the proposed expressway at six points.

"When you walk through that park, you wonder why elected officials want to destroy a part of the city's character," Mrs. Anona Stoner says emphatically. She is secretary of Citizens to Preserve Overton Park, Inc., a group providing

OPE 92-26



Above—Quiet conversation comes naturally when the wind murmurs through the lakeside trees. **Right**—A picnic in the shade offers a quiet rest from more strenuous activities in Overton Park.



the major opposition to the highway.

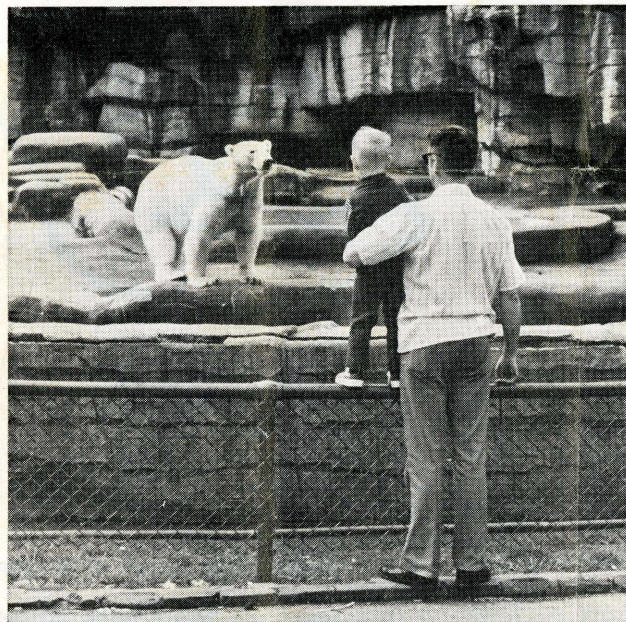
Former Secretary of Transportation John Volpe at first approved the park route, but after a court encounter he reversed himself in 1973. Another court decision earlier this year affirmed Volpe had acted properly in rejecting the plan. Proponents—including Tennessee Governor Winfield Dunn—now have approached the current secretary, Claude Brinegar, to approve the through-the-park route.

Clay Huddleston, chief executive officer for Memphis, says one primary alternative route strikes a stable residential area and another is through the city's "only truly integrated area, one that is a source of pride." However, the Overton Park path also hits a solid residential neighborhood.

"That left us with the park [route], which is not really good itself," he comments. "Now we're locked in with that decision . . . [it's] not that we don't like squirrels, trees, and flowers. It's just a hard-nosed economic issue. . . . Downtown is not accessible."

Opponents point out the disruption of park activities, the damage to the forest, and expected harm to the zoo.

Former zoo veterinarian Daniel Laughlin has said the animals would be permanently and severely harmed by the highway, citing noise pollution and lead contamination. Zoo Director Joel Wallach agrees that "certain animals would be affected," particularly grazers and leaf-eaters by lead fallout, and bears by the noise.



Bears are especially noise sensitive and would have to move if the highway is built.

One proponent dismisses the zoo arguments and concentrates on the forest. City Councilman Robert James sees the entire situation as an issue of trees. He says the only way for people to see the forest now is to walk.

"With the expressway, you take out only a few trees, and projections say perhaps 50,000 cars a day will pass through the park. This increases visibility. I don't see how anyone can argue with that," he concludes.

However, the argument continues, and it probably won't end until the expressway is built. Somewhere.

