

Sept. 20, 1975

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Blanton Says State Lacks Tunnel Funds

Gov. Ray Blanton said yesterday the state is not in a position to participate in a cut-and-cover route for Interstate 40 through Overton Park if the plan is given final federal approval.

Blanton told editors of The Commercial Appeal that the state does not have funds to provide its 10 per cent of the construction cost of such a tunnel. Estimates for the construction have been \$100 million to \$160 million.

"No, we couldn't even maintain it," Blanton said. He said estimates place the annual maintenance costs at \$3.5 million to \$4 million.

The governor had earlier expressed concern that the maintenance of the tunnel — including exhaust and drainage systems — would be totally the state's responsibility.

Federal Transportation Secretary William T. Coleman Jr. proposed the cut-and-cover method, and a New York consulting firm is studying the plan.

The consulting firm, Singstad, Kehart, November and Hurka, announced last week that its study was almost half finished. The firm is to complete the study in 10 weeks and has been working on it for about 5 weeks.

The firm is also studying the slurry-wall technique of tunneling which Transportation Department sources say would bring the construction costs closer to the \$100-million figure.

Blanton indicated he has already determined the feasibility of Coleman's plan and does not find it financially acceptable.

He said he felt the "closest thing to anything feasible" for the I-40 construction through the park has been a proposal by the state Highway Department for a "semidepressed" roadway.

Blanton said he did not know whether such a plan would be approved by the courts. Such a design was previously rejected by federal officials on grounds that it would not comply with federal environmental laws.

Asked if the state was in a financial position to participate in construction of this nature, Blanton said he could give no definite answer. "But I think we can."

He voiced little optimism about another plan being studied which would involve an elevated, six-lane expressway over North Parkway.

Proponents of this plan have placed construction costs at about \$26 million but Blanton yesterday questioned these figures.

"I can't help but believe, as a bridge builder, that their estimates are extremely low," he said.

The governor also said he did not feel I-40 could be linked with a proposed northern expressway around the city.

"The feasibility of increasing the capacity of the north circle to take care of that much additional traffic is nil . . . because of the costs," he said.

He said the search for a solution to the situation should not be abandoned because "people are being maimed and killed because it is not completed."

Blanton met with editors yesterday to discuss his position on a number of matters, including the controversial firing of Dr. Earl Ninow as superintendent of Western State Hospital.

He continued to maintain that the action was not political and "I would have fired my own brother if he'd been responsible for the conditions" Blanton said he found in a surprise visit to the Bolivar facility.

In connection with other matters, the governor stopped just short of predicting new state taxes for next year.

Asked if he would ask the legislature for new or increased taxes in January, he replied, "If I had to say off-handed I'd say yes."

He added, however, that the administration is "going through department by department" to determine where money might be saved. He said the administration made "a dramatic budget reduction this past year — \$121 million."

Blanton said he anticipated "a much better relationship" with the General Assembly next year "but the state is also in a tougher financial situation."

He said this financial situation was due to a projected 6 per cent increase in state revenues and that the increase has only been about 3.5 per cent.