

Waiting Time Again At The Old I-40 Gap

By MORRIS CUNNINGHAM

WASHINGTON — U. S. Department of Transportation engineers are disappointed by the negative reaction of Tennessee highway officials to the idea of a slurry wall tunnel to carry Interstate 40 under Overton Park in Memphis.

"We are puzzled because this plan was much cheaper than the tunnel that had been considered before," said one DOT engineer.

THE SLURRY WALL project, which Gov. Ray Blanton and other state officials ridiculed, called for a narrow, 80-foot cut and two three-lane roadways stacked one atop the other in a tunnel almost one mile in length.

The New York engineering firm, Singstad, Kehhart, November and Hurka, which produced the plan and pronounced it feasible, estimated the cost at \$119 million, including about \$90 million for the tunnel, \$25 million for approaches, and \$4 million for cloverleaf interchanges at each end.

DOT engineers contrast this with the \$166 million price tag on a tunnel with side-by-side roadways that emerged from a state-sponsored study.

"I don't know what will happen now," said a disappointed DOT engineer. "I guess we will just have to sit back and wait."

EXCEPT FOR AN airlift, or catapults, state and federal engineers have now considered just about every conceivable way of moving traffic between the two ends of I-40 and closing the 3.7-mile gap. And as the years have passed and administrative rulings and court decisions have been piled one on top of the other, the solution has boiled down to some kind of tunnel.

U. S. Transportation Secretary William T. Coleman Jr. put this in plain English last April 21 when he ruled out other alternatives and concluded, "thus, it is my judgment that there is no 'prudent and feasible' alternative to a route under the park . . ."

And he went out of his way to rule out leaving things as they are, tidied up a bit with transit and arterial street improvements. He said this would be deficient for several reasons, including the

gap that would be left in the interstate system and the city's own traffic system.

Court decisions have established that the U. S. Transportation secretary's views are all-important because no federal aid highway may encroach upon a park until he finds there is no "prudent and feasible" alternative and that the design holds the environmental impact to a minimum.

HAVING DECIDED that nothing but a tunnel would suffice, Coleman called for a study of the slurry wall construction technique so that disturbances to the park could be held to an absolute minimum, both in land area and in time.

The study found that a narrow 80-foot cut with stacked roadways would be feasible and that the park surface would have to be disturbed for no longer than one year. The surface would be fully restored while work continued in the tunnel below.

Blanton and state engineers have questioned whether the tunnel could be kept adequately drained. A DOT engineer points to the tunnels under the Hudson River, Baltimore Harbor, San Francisco Bay, and other bodies of water.

Fears have been expressed over the possible explosion of a vehicle carrying volatile substances. Such vehicles are barred from the Baltimore Harbor tunnel as well as others.

STATE ENGINEERS have voiced a lack of confidence in the slurry wall construction technique, and, it has been learned, have some support within the federal highway administration, a DOT agency.

But DOT engineers point to a number of successful examples of the technique and see no reason why it can't work in Memphis.

DOT engineers were enthused over the prospects in Memphis, perhaps overly so. State sources contend the federally-financed study was not as thorough as it could have been. Certainly there is reason to believe the consultants were under some pressure from DOT for a prompt and favorable report.

Where do we go from here? As the DOT engineer said, "I guess we will just have to sit back and wait."