

Hearings On I-40 Are Slated Here

By MORRIS CUNNINGHAM

From The Commercial Appeal
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Transportation Secretary William T. Coleman Jr. agreed Thursday to hold public hearings in Memphis in about three months on the long-stalled Interstate 40 segment through Overton Park, and to consider all possible ways of closing the 3.7-mile gap — including reconsideration of proposals previously rejected.

Coleman's promise was made at an hour-long meeting with Sen. Bill Brock (R-Tenn.), Reps. Ed Jones (D-Tenn.) and Harold Ford (D-Tenn.) and a number of other persons, including highway officials from Tennessee.

According to Brock, Coleman ordered completion of a lagging environmental impact statement within 30 days and said he would hold the hearings no later than 65 days after that.

He promised a firm decision on the most "prudent and feasible" way of completing the job within 45 days after the Memphis hearings.

William A. Goodwin, deputy Tennessee highway commissioner, said he expects the state to complete work on the statement by March 1.

That would mean, according to Coleman's timetable, the Memphis hearings would come in early May and a firm decision from Coleman would be forthcoming before July 1.

It was not immediately clear just how far Coleman might be willing to go on reconsidering decisions rendered by him and his two predecessors at DOT.

John Volpe, in one of his final acts before leaving the secretary's post, rejected on Jan. 19, 1973, almost any design except underground tunnel as a "prudent and asible" method of completing the Over-

ton Park segment of I-40, the only uncompleted section of the coast-to-coast interstate.

His action was upheld by his successor, Claude Brinegar. And last April 21, Coleman ruled out as environmentally unsound any design or routing except a narrow cut-and-cover tunnel under the park.

Among those at the Thursday evening meeting was John Vardaman, a Washington attorney who represents the Memphis-based Citizens to Preserve Overton Park.

Vardaman, in response to questioning by Coleman, indicated his clients were prepared to go to court on any decision that would cause disruption of the park.

Coleman has favored implementing a slurry wall method of building a cut-and-cover tunnel under Overton Park that would minimize damage and construction time.

The state has balked at Coleman's suggestion, claiming the \$119-million price tag is too high, and is engaged in a study of a wider, shallower tunnel under the park that would take twice as long (about two years) to complete and would cost about \$20 million less.

One of the purposes of the Thursday meeting, arranged by Ford, was to present Coleman with a partially depressed, partially covered design to be routed through the park.

The plan, backed by a group known as Tennesseans for Better Transportation, composed largely of highway builders and users, was roughly estimated to cost about \$25 million.

While Coleman was reported to have shown interest in the plan, it is similar to one which already has been rejected by three DOT secretaries and which has drawn the fiercest opposition from environmentalists.