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Coleman Plans Hearing On I-40 In Memphis

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A public hearing on how to complete the controversial missing segment of Interstate 40 through or around Overton Park has been ordered for Memphis by U.S. Transportation Secretary William T. Coleman, who said a final decision is long overdue and the people of Memphis are entitled to one. He said he expects to make a decision in a few months, probably in July.

At the public hearing, environmentalists and supporters of the expressway segment through the park will be given two hours each to state their case.

Following a meeting of Tennesseans in his office yesterday, Coleman said: "The people of Memphis have a right to have a final decision. I'm appalled that this thing has gone on as long as it has (20 years) and I mean to see that a decision is made soon."

Coleman met with Tennessee congressional representatives, Tennesseans for Better Transportation, and a representative of the Citizens to Preserve Overton Park.

Gene Brymer, executive director of TBT, said Coleman was impressed with the organization's partial cut-and-cover plan and that the plan was endorsed by Sen. Bill Brock and Congressmen Harold Ford and Ed Jones.

Coleman ordered a "completely new environmental impact report" on all I-40 plans through Overton Park and was told he could have them by March 1.

He said that when the report was completed, a public hearing would be held in Memphis on all aspects of the expressway through the park within 65 days.

Then, within 45 days, a final decision will be made, he said. Brymer said the hearing probably would be held in May and that a final decision could be expected in July.

Coleman told William A. Goodwin, deputy Tennessee highway commissioner, to turn in an entirely new environmental statement on all plans for the expressway segment, 3.7 miles.

The Secretary ruled out a surface plan and said there must be a depressed roadway of some sort through the park.

He turned to Sen. Brock, after the TBT presentation of its cut-and-cover method and said: "What do you think of the plan, Senator Brock?"

Brock said: "We need the highway badly and this plan looks like one the state can handle in the way of matching funds."

Brymer said that in effect Brock endorsed the TBT plan, which was presented by Brymer, Ira Heckman, outgoing TBT president, and Jim Madison, of Memphis, member of the TBT board of directors.

He said that Ford and Jones also

endorsed the plan.

Also at the hearing was Frank Palumbo, city engineer and public works director, who represented Mayor Wyeth Chandler, a supporter of the TBT plan.

John Vardaman, Washington attorney, represented Citizens to Preserve Overton Park.

Coleman asked Vardaman: "If we can come to Memphis and hold a four-hour hearing to discuss all merits, is there a way to get the Citizens to Preserve Overton Park to agree on a compromise?"

Vardaman said if the decision of Coleman is to go through the park, there will be no compromise. He promised another court suit.

"Do you mean if we put in a facility that will allow more trees your group will still be opposed?" Coleman said. "You are just going to take the position that you took the matter to court and beat it and you are going to rub it in the rest of your life?"

Vardaman's reply, in effect, was that the matter would go back to court, said Brymer.

Alternatives of going over North Parkway or under it or not to build the road at all was Vardaman's position. Coleman ruled out all three alternatives.

Tennesseans for Better Transportation worked up the compromise plan. TBT is composed of officials from all modes of transportation in the state.

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