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# Time To Use Sense, Not Emotion, On The I-40 Question

By MICHAEL GREHL

Editor, The Commercial Appeal

**I**NCREDIBLE as it seems, there are Memphians who were born and grew to majority while the debate over routing I-40 through Overton Park raged. An entire generation has grown up while the issue itself remains unsettled.

Small wonder that a substantial number of citizens are wearied of the whole thing and many will accept any solution so long as the road is built. My guess is that if a vote were held today the majority of citizens would say "Let 'er rip," in perhaps more gentle words.

When the first opposition appeared it was treated by most through-the-park proponents as misguided, not knowledgeable and of insignificant strength. Subsequent events have proved that cavalier attitude was a mistake.

In those long ago days the nation was in the grip of the superhighway-interstate-expressway fever and it seemed inconceivable that any roadblocks to progress could or should seriously be entertained let alone prevail. Environment was an unfamiliar word; the concept of protecting it was not in vogue.

**SINCE THEN** interstate highways have been abused — unfairly I think — as unnecessary slabs of concrete that aren't nice to Mother Nature and are built only as the result of stout lobbying by special interests.

In fact, from what I can determine, the entire debate over I-40 and Overton Park has been characterized by misinformation, passion, intransigence and lack of respect for facts as well as the other point of view.

There has been such an abundance of finger pointing, dissembling and gnashing of teeth that a neutral

observer might well be forgiven for saying, "A pox on both your houses."

I say all that without flinching or ignoring the fact this newspaper has been in the thick of things.

Recently we carried the lengthy summations of the cases to be made for the original plan and an alternative. The spokesman for going through the park is a keen legal mind who wound up saying his position can prevail only if Congress grants Memphis exemption from present law. He supports that course, having been frustrated again and again in the courts. On the other side, a veteran defender of keeping the park free of an interstate suggests the northern leg of I-240 be further designated I-40.

Sometime about May William T. Coleman Jr., secretary of transportation, will hold public hearings here to go over the entire problem once more. Then he'll make recommendations, but an attorney for Citizens to Preserve Overton Park makes no bones about the fact his group will go to court if Coleman finds for the park route.

When those hearings take place it would be well for us to recognize the changes that have taken place since all this began.

Downtown no longer is THE only commercial center of Memphis. It is one of several. But it is first among equals and it can be no other way in this or any other city. It is an anchor, it draws thousands of workers from all directions, and it is in the process of expensive rejuvenation. It contributes a big chunk of tax money to the city and county.

Memphis is the hub of an ever-growing three-state

area. It must have high speed highways for its visitors as well as its own citizens. Those of us who have lived in the few metropolitan areas without good interstate roads particularly appreciate that.

The understandable fear and emotion that attended plans to uproot hundreds of families to make way for the park route is no longer much of an argument. They've been moved. The land lies unused.

To designate the northern circumferential as I-40 with more ramps, as suggested, would result in further disruption. The area in question is not barren, otherwise useless land.

Finally, if the latest proposal for a tunnel through the park is the only one found feasible by the courts, then the law is just what Mr. Bumble said it was. Construction costs of \$119 million and annual maintenance of \$450,000 are out of anybody's ball park. On its face, such an amount is unsupportable and the state has made it plain to all it will not ante up its share.

**WE HAVE SUFFERED** more than 20 years of legal trench warfare that has caused acrimony and denial. The two sides sometimes appear to have forgotten what the original issue was all about and what the stakes are. The fighting is what seems to count, all too often.

We are counting on a return to good sense by the parties involved and a reasonable solution by Coleman and the state. Then let us abide by it without mustering legions of lawyers for yet one more Holy War. But spare us any more \$119-million tunnels, please.