

# Park Route Hearings Find Little New

By MICHAEL LOLLAR

The Overton Park expressway hearings held here last week have been compared to a head-on collision between poetry and progress.

High-minded environmentalists were pitted against hard-nosed pragmatists for 19 long-winded hours in the council chambers of City Hall.

Some of the faces were new among the 164 citizens who spoke for and against building Interstate 40 through Overton Park, but not one said anything new or more convincing than past arguments for either side.

The environmentalists expounded on the value of a woodland getaway removed from the spewing exhausts of midtown traffic. "A place to become one with nature," one said, while others ranked the park as a melting pot of ideas and attitudes on par with Central Park in New York.

Those for the park route talked about the 20 years of their frustration, waiting for completion of the "missing link" in I-40. They talked about spiraling highway construction costs coupled with increasing traffic congestion, trying to revive downtown Memphis and confusion over current access to I-40 in the midtown area.

The only departure from repetitious tedium was the occasional comment of an angry citizen whose carefully thought-out statement drew solely on emotion. "Shove it right smack dab through the park," one said, while another asked, "Man, how could they do that to a park?"

And a gray-haired man near the front of the audience frequently shouted, "Amen," during the first day of the two-day marathon.

J. Alan Hanover, general counsel for the Tennessee Transportation Department, and Charles F. Newman, attorney for the Citizens to Preserve Overton Park, Inc., say it's cynical to attribute little value to the hearings. In the first place, the public airings are required by law on the route and design of federally funded highways.

And, assuming he exposes himself to a transcript of the hearings, U.S. Transpor-

tation Secretary William T. Coleman might be moved one way or another by the citizenry's urgings.

But, from all appearances, Coleman would do well to toss the whole transcript in a Dempster Dumpster, fly to Memphis

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with a couple of objective highway engineers and take a firsthand look at the situation.

It could serve little purpose in his decision-making process to ponder the fact that "half-naked ladies" sometimes lounge about the park or that a Fayette County man moved away from Memphis because local pollution bothers his stuffy sinuses.

Yet Coleman was asked to take those facts into account before reaching a decision on the route and design of the 3.74-mile midtown highway segment.

Other considerations, closer to the heart of the controversy, were expressed — some eloquently. But in the main the oratory was a farce, diverting attention from whether the "missing link" is necessary and whether its need justifies park intrusion.

In the heat of the public debate, speakers for both sides exercised their privilege to exaggerate. When the crowd had cleared, spokesmen for the park route questioned the claim that a concrete ribbon would "destroy the park."

And environmentalists questioned how failure to complete the midcity segment

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# Little Weight Given Hearings

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could forever stall revitalization of downtown Memphis.

Some spokesmen for both sides feel the primary value of the hearings is to provide a base of public opinion on each side of the controversy. After the transportation secretary makes up his mind based on concrete issues, he may point to the mountain of sentiment (pro or con) which supports his decision, they say.

Newman, the park preservation attorney, feels the hearings are "necessary, and they're worthwhile. But the case is not going to be decided based on the hearings. It's going to be decided primarily on the basis of the law and the record of the case."

Hanover, the transportation department attorney, says comments at such hearings refresh the minds of decision-makers, "pointing out things that might otherwise be forgotten in the shuffle.

But both concede that regardless of whatever care Coleman uses to study the record and reach an objective decision, it will be only another cog in the overall process. Newman already is plotting the course of further courtroom battles similar to those which have succeeded in stop-

ping state efforts to build the park route since 1969.

Once more, U.S. Dist. Judge Bailey Brown will be the familiar, admittedly unhappy arbiter of the hot-potato controversy.

Those hearings, which aroused tempers but skirted the highly technical issue of highway construction, were like washing glove-covered hands.

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