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Speedy I-40 Ruling Pledged

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WASHINGTON — Transportation Secretary Brock Adams promised Thursday to rule as quickly as possible on a Tennessee plan to close a 3.7-mile gap in Interstate 40 in Memphis by building a sunken, partially covered plaza-type roadway through Overton Park.

"I hope to have a decision within 30 to 60 days," Adams said after receiving the state's plan from a delegation headed by

Gov. Ray Blanton and including members of the Tennessee congressional delegation, Memphis leaders and others.

The state's plan, which carries a \$33-million cost estimate, was outlined to Adams and his aides at a closed meeting by Blanton, Tennessee Transportation Commissioner Eddie Shaw and Shaw's deputy, Bill Goodwin, and others in the delegation.

Adams, a former Democratic House member from Washington State, emerged

to tell media representatives he will move rapidly as he said he has attempted to do with other problems he confronted when he took over as transportation secretary two months ago.

"I'll go to work on it as I have the others," he said. "I think it has been pending far too long."

He said there still is some work to be done on the environmental impact statement but that it should be completed without significant delay.

"I don't anticipate any more hearings," he added, "but I may go to Memphis myself just to take a look at it. I'm reserving judgment on that."

Federal environmental laws require that before a federal-aid highway may encroach upon a public park, the U.S. secretary of transportation must find there is no "feasible and prudent alternative" and that the highway design minimizes environmental damage.

It is this determination that Adams must make before the Tennessee Department of Transportation can move ahead with the project.

An affirmative finding by Adams would clear the way for the state to start letting contracts unless — many anticipate — opponents of the park route renew previous court battles.

"We believe the plan we have submitted is feasible and acceptable," Blanton said

(Continued on Page 3)

I-40 Meeting Leaves Beard Optimistic

(Continued from Page 1)

after the meeting. He said he was encouraged to expect a favorable ruling by the questions Transportation Department technicians asked during the presentation.

"There is a crying need to complete this project," Blanton added. "People are being killed and maimed on our highways because of the congestion that it (the delay) is causing."

Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) said the delegation was unanimous in supporting the state's proposal, and praised the excellence of the presentation.

"This is the fourth meeting of this kind I have attended," Baker said, referring to the years-long dispute over the project, "and I've never seen a better presentation."

Baker, who once had reservations about building I-40 through the park, said he had become convinced "the road can't go anywhere else." And he said the design submitted by the state minimizes damage to the environment.

Blanton said only a "very small number of people in Memphis, no more than 2 per cent," oppose building the road through the park. He said some of these people always will be opposed.

The governor parried a question as to whether the state will be willing to pay the entire cost of the project if all else fails and Congress removes it from the application of federal environmental laws

by taking the 3.7-mile segment out of the Federal Interstate Highway System.

"I would hope we wouldn't have to do that," the governor said.

Rep. Ed Jones (D-Tenn.) commended the state presentation and the unanimity of the Tennessee group.

"It was a very good meeting," said Mayor Wyeth Chandler. "I am sure we will have a decision very shortly. We're dealing now with a man who will make a decision. I hope it will be favorable."

"I thought the state presented a very impressive plan," commented Sen. Jim Sasser (D-Tenn.). "Forty-one per cent of the road would be covered, and 3 of the 26 acres of parkland acquired by the state would be made a part of the park. Covered parts would be beautified with plants."

"This controversy has gone on too long," Sasser added. "It ought to be resolved."

Rep. Robin Beard (R-Tenn.) said, "I thought it was an excellent meeting. I honestly feel Brock Adams — and I know people have heard this before — will make a decision. The presentation was good, and it was a joint effort, Democrats and Republicans."

"I respect Brock Adams," Beard continued, "and I don't think he will shirk his responsibility. I think he will say yes or no. But if he says yes, I think we've got to be prepared for another lawsuit."

Rep. Harold Ford of Memphis, the only area House member to miss the meeting,

said later he was preparing for a meeting with Department of Housing and Urban Development officials in reference to converting Fontainebleau Apartments in Whitehaven to low-cost public housing.

He said he met later with the HUD officials and Mayor Chandler and HUD agreed to withhold a decision until the city can supply its views and supporting data.

Ford also said the House convened at 11 a.m. (Washington time) and that Beard and Jones missed a vote by attending the I-40 meeting. Beard, asked about this later, said the vote was procedural in nature and of no significance.

"I had to miss a committee meeting, too," Beard said. "I just felt this was something important and I'd like for us to get over with it so we can go on to other things."

Others at the meeting with Secretary Adams were Shelby County Mayor Roy Nixon, Memphis City Council Chairman Oscar Edmunds; Sam Hollis, president of the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce, and the chamber's chief executive officer Ed Boldt.

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