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Give Light and the People Will Find Their Own Way

The War Isn't Over

Memphis has just lost another battle in the long struggle to get Interstate 40 completed through Overton Park.

The setback came yesterday in a letter from Secretary of Transportation Brock Adams to Tennessee's Gov. Ray Blanton. The letter included this statement:

"My decision, as secretary of transportation, is to reject the proposal of the State of Tennessee to build I-40 through Overton Park. This proposal does not meet the standards required by the Supreme Court in the case of Citizens to Preserve Overton Park vs. Secretary John Volpe."

Some citizens are detecting a tone of finality in the secretary's letter, suggesting, maybe, that the idea of routing the highway through the park should be abandoned altogether. Said Rep. Harold Ford in Washington: "As far as the expressway going through Overton Park is concerned, it's all over."

We don't hold with that interpretation at all, simply because the need for the completed interstate still exists, and as long as the need is there, the effort to meet it should continue — even if it takes another 10 years.

True, Secretary Adams rejected "the proposal of the State of Tennessee." Presumably, he was referring to the latest plan submitted to him, which called for a partially depressed roadway to be covered at intervals by plaza-like passageways.

It's a fair question to ask: Is the secretary closing the door to all routes through the park and all designs?

His letter requires much more study before a definite answer can be given.

Federal Highway Administrator William Cox gave the opinion that all propos-

als to run I-40 through Overton Park are, in effect, rejected.

Under the law, the secretary of transportation has fulfilled his obligations when he says yes or no to proposals to use publicly owned parkland for highways. He does not have to offer alternate routes.

But should a secretary's moral obligations stop with rejection of a plan?

As head of a major department of government, the secretary is responsible for the promotion of all forms of transportation — rail, air and highway. What does Secretary Adams have to offer as a means of bridging a 3.7-mile gap in an important coast-to-coast highway system? Does he have suggestions for the use of the right-of-way already purchased and cleared of buildings in the heart of Memphis? Isn't the completion of I-40 of interest to the federal government?

We do appreciate the fact that Secretary Adams gave a forthright answer to the state's proposal, whereas earlier secretaries weaseled out of making decisions at the showdown. And we appreciate the fact that Adams came to Memphis for a personal inspection of the proposed route which would take 26 acres of the 342-acre park.

Some authorities on the expressway issue have suggested that an act of Congress might be sought to exempt Memphis from the environmental statutes protecting urban parks. This proposal should be thoroughly explored.

Meanwhile, the state Department of Transportation will be examining procedures as to what comes next. We hope that Secretary Adams can be of some help.

And remember, Memphians, we may have lost a battle, but the war isn't over.

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