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Future Memphis, Chamber Forsake Park Route Stance

By MICHAEL LOLLAR

Executive committees of the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce and Future Memphis yesterday gave up on an expressway through Overton Park, voting for a new study of alternatives to using park land to complete Interstate 40.

Palmer Brown, chairman of the transportation committee for Future Memphis, Inc., and chairman of the chamber's subcommittee on I-40, said telephone polls of each organization's committee showed unanimous support for the study of alternatives.

"We're just being realistic," Brown said late yesterday after the votes were announced.

The organizations announced the vote jointly, saying they had unanimously endorsed "an effort to seek governmental funding for the employment of a nationally recognized, private planning firm to conduct detailed studies of alternates to the completion of Interstate 40 which would not involve the use of any of the land of Overton Park."

Brown said, "You could call it a shift in tactics." He said his hair has turned gray in 18 years of work for the chamber's steadfast position in support of completion of the state's proposed park route.

"But it is not a shift in principle... What we've been interested in is transporting citizens, and we're pretty well convinced by the decision of the transportation secretary."

U.S. Transportation Secretary Brock Adams in September turned down the state's proposal for a plaza design expressway through Overton Park. The park route has been actively opposed by environmentalists.

"They've got the law on their side. That's the hell of it. All of the decisions have been against going through the park," Brown said.

Sources said that Brown and Neely Mallory of the Future Memphis transportation committee suggested the idea of an independent planning firm to conduct studies on alternatives.

Mallory said the Future Memphis transportation committee "saw an opportunity to solve an old annoying problem in this city and thought, 'Let's give it a try.'"

The votes also were announced in conjunction with the Citizens to Preserve Overton Park. Charles F. Newman, attorney for the environmental group, said he saw nothing unusual in the sudden shift despite years of adamant support by both civic groups for the park route.

J. Alan Hanover, special counsel for the Tennessee Department of Transportation, said, "My first reaction is astonishment because of the fact that the Chamber of Commerce and Future Memphis have always been very cooperative with the state and vice versa.

"I am surprised that they would take a step like this without finding out the exact status of the matter from the state's standpoint. What they've done could be very harmful to the state at this time."

Tennessee officials have been awaiting

(Continued on Page 4)

Dec. 23, 1977

Park Expressway Scrapped

(Continued from Page 1)

public hearings suggested by Sen. Howard Baker (R-Tenn.) to consider the Overton Park controversy in Congress.

Alternatives suggested to the park route in the past have included routes paralleling the Louisville & Nashville Railroad

right-of-way north of the park, routes over, under or alongside North Parkway on the northern edge of the park, and several routes south of the park.

The state has claimed that any route outside the park would not be feasible from an engineering standpoint or would be too far removed from the normal flow of traffic to be worthwhile.

Citizens to Preserve Overton Park has claimed that the state has never conducted detailed studies of any alternatives since the park route was chosen in 1956.

Edgar H. Bailey, president of Future Memphis, said that both civic groups view the call for a study of alternatives "as a very positive step. It is the first time to my knowledge that both proponents and opponents have been on the same side of this issue."

James McGehee, president-elect of the chamber, said, "This to me is a very positive step between environmentalists and the various organizations interested in Memphis and its development... I'm glad that so many people on both sides of this dilemma are now willing to come together and seek a logical and equitable solution."

The chamber's current president, Sam Hollis, could not be reached for comment.

OPE 30-31