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Authors	Black, Kay Pittman; Jones, Tom
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Park Board Behind Route, Says Lewis

By KAY PITTMAN BLACK
and TOM JONES
Press-Scimitar Staff Writers

Hal Lewis, executive director of the Memphis Park Commission, said the Park Commission did "everything" it could to prevent the expressway from going through Overton Park and had now "given up" the fight.

Lewis testified by deposition and his sworn testimony, taken on Aug. 10, was read yesterday.

Although Lewis' deposition was taken at the request of the attorneys for the objectors seeking to block Interstate-40 from being constructed in the park, it was offered for the federal court record by Dale Woodall, attorney (intervening on the side of the state and federal defendants) for the City of Memphis, Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce, Future Memphis, Inc., and the Downtown Association.

Lewis' statement followed questioning from Charles F. Newman, one of the Memphis attorneys for the objectors.

Newman asked Lewis, "The fact that so much wilderness area has been taken and destroyed by the buildings (maintenance buildings and the new fire station in the park) is no reason to sacrifice the rest, but is a reason to preserve the rest, isn't it?"

"That is your opinion," said Lewis.

"What is your opinion?" asked Newman.

"My opinion is that the route has been decided and we have done everything we

can to prevent it and we have given up and we are cooperating now," answered Lewis.

The trial enters its 21st day of hearing today in Federal Chief Judge Bailey Brown's court. Woodall said there is a possibility he may call Mayor Henry Loeb to the witness stand this afternoon.

In cross-examination by U.S. Atty. Thomas F. Turlay, Lewis was asked, "Can you think of anything that could be done or could now be done to minimize damage to the park by the proposed construction?"

"I can't think of a thing, since it is coming through, that could be done to minimize the damage. No sir."

Lewis said "to his knowledge" no state or federal officials made any study of harm to the park caused by pollution but stated that the Park Commission had obtained the services of a Bill Hoff of St. Louis, "a zoo man," to make a study on any harm that might result

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from the expressway to the animals.

Lewis said, "His report, as I recall, was not damaging at all." He said a highway in St. Louis runs about as close to its zoo as Interstate-40 would run to the Memphis zoo.

"What are your plans with regard to moving existing facilities inside the park and zoo as a result of the expressway construction? For example, do you intend to move the pavilion which is now located inside the park?" asked Newman.

"We had planned to (move it) and I think we probably will move it to the north side of the expressway," said Lewis.

"Do you plan to move the parking area which is now just south of the zoo on the western border of the park? Is that parking area going to be replaced by another parking area?" Newman asked.

"Yes, it will be replaced," said Lewis. "It will cover the part that is now where the wading pool and playground is."

Lewis said it had not been decided but he thought the wading pool and playground would be moved between the east end of the zoo and the parkway.

"Talking about the parking area at the east side of the zoo, do you have plans to

expand it?" asked Newman.

Lewis said that parking area probably would be placed south of the parking area that is now east of the zoo. He said it might require cutting some additional trees to move the pavilion, but that the Park Commission would try to limit the cutting to small or medium-sized trees.

Lewis said an area would also have to be cleared around the pavilion for restrooms and picnic tables.

"That will pretty well take care of the woodland north of the expressway?" asked Newman. "There won't be much left there?"

Lewis said he didn't know how many acres of trees are there now and that he had no idea how many would be left.

In reply to questions, Lewis said the Park Commission had adopted two or three resolutions since June 4, 1964, opposing the expressway through the park. "I don't think there was ever a resolution agreeing to it," he said. "They (the commission) have changed their position in that they felt it was a foregone conclusion and they are going along with it and ask that the best deal possible be made with the state, which I think was done. . . ."

"Why did you change your position as executive director in regard to the expressway?" asked Newman.

"We never did change our position," said Lewis. "The only thing was, we figured it was a losing battle. We would still rather not see the expressway come through there, but we have accepted the money now and we have to go along with it."

Lewis said it appeared from state Highway Department studies that there was no other feasible route for the expressway.

"In reaching this conclusion . . . did you consider the

special, unique value of Overton Park?" asked Newman.

"Yes," said Lewis. "That is the reason we got considerably more than the appraised value on the thing."

"Was there need to acquire money to finance the purchase of Fox Meadows (golf course)?" asked Newman. "Was this a consideration in the Park Commission decision to acquiesce in having the expressway built through Overton Park?"

"No, sir," replied Lewis.

Newman then read a letter from Park Commission attorney Thomas Prewitt to Mayor Loeb, stating that "it was essential that the sale of Overton Park land, its negotiation and sale be speeded up so as to produce the necessary money to buy Fox Meadows."

Lewis said he had no knowledge of the letter. He said it was originally the understanding of the commission that purchase of Fox Meadows was to come "out of funding" and not from the \$2 million that the commission was paid for the Overton Park land. "But it got changed," he said.

Newman asked Lewis if he had not told him earlier that he was dissatisfied with the way the Fox Meadows purchase (with Overton Park money) was handled.

"That is right," said Lewis. In reply to other questions, he said he had to be satisfied with it, but was not happy about it.

Also testifying yesterday was Claude Harmon, director of research and planning for the state Highway Department. He explained methods for approving highway routes.

Robert Odle, development engineer for the Highway Department, was scheduled to be the first witness today.