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"No Alternative to Park"

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Wednesday, April 23, 1975

No Alternative To Park

IN A CONTROVERSY that has dragged out since the mid-1950s it is risky to anticipate an end. But Transportation Secretary William T. Coleman at least has taken a firm step toward resolving the problem of the unfinished segment of Interstate Highway 40 through Memphis. His proposal for a cut-and-cover roadway under Overton Park rejects any other alternative and aims at doing the least possible damage to above-ground parkland.

It is a good ruling. It has been evident since first plans for an east-west expressway were developed two decades ago that the logical route in the midcity area lay through Overton Park. It was approved, the land was sold by the city to the state, and a contract was let before a 1969 lawsuit halted the project.

After years of delay and litigation it remains the best route. And Coleman has made the decision as to whether there are any "prudent and feasible" alternatives.

He says there are not.

Former Transportation Secretary Claude S. Brinegar, on leaving office in late January, narrowed the options for completing this part of I-40 to three:

- The cut-and-cover tunnel under Overton Park.
- A route north of the park and under North Parkway.
- A no-build plan, leaving I-40 dangling at two terminals, one at Claybrook and the west and at a point near Broad and Malcomb to the east.

Brinegar informally limited his successor to those three propositions.

Coleman this week made the

right choice. It would be far more disruptive and expensive to build beneath North Parkway past Southwestern and the Parkway House apartments. And not to build would be idiocy. Only a few obstructionists can accept the idea of leaving a 3.7-mile gap in this coast-to-coast highway, or in depriving Memphis of a long overdue expressway through the city.

In focusing on the cut-and-cover under the park, Coleman has made every effort to meet the federal standard that requires minimal harm to a park if there is no alternative to routing a highway through it.

If the building techniques Coleman has suggested are employed, there will be only temporary damage to the landscape. The surface will be restored to essentially its present condition in a very short time.

THERE ARE OTHER steps to be taken, of course. The Tennessee Transportation Department has to follow through on Coleman's long-awaited guidelines. There must be environmental impact statements. And, inevitably, at some point there will be another trip to federal court.

But until the Coleman decision has been tested in court the legal "ifs" cannot be resolved.

The need is to move along quickly and get the court question settled.

The transportation secretary has anticipated the challenge park route opponents. He is to face them in order to close major gap."

"Thank you, I think," said Alice...

