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Item Type	Article
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Publisher	Press-Scimitar
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Download date	2026-03-05 14:58:41
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10267/30116

I-40 Route Through Park Still Must Cross 'Ifs'

By WENDELL POTTER
The Press-Scimitar Bureau

WASHINGTON — Tennessee Transportation Commissioner Eddie Shaw says bulldozers could be cutting a path through Overton Park for Interstate 40 in two years — if the U.S. Department of Transportation says "start digging" and the environmentalists soon lose their final battle in the courts.

Those are the same two big "ifs" that have confronted Tennessee transportation officials for the past 22 years.

But there are indications now that I-40 will be completed before too many more years, even if the taxpayers of Tennessee have to pay for the short but incredibly expensive interstate gap in the heart of Memphis.

Yesterday, two of Tennessee's congressmen, its governor and two senators, and the mayors of Memphis and Shelby County temporarily shoved aside their political differences to prove to Transportation Secretary Brock Adams that almost everybody wants the highway built through Overton park one way or the other.

They went to Adams' office to personally deliver a plan for completing the highway that a group called Tennesseans for Better Transportation came up with to solve the Overton park dilemma.

That plan is a partially-depressed route through the park that would cost at least \$33 million. Forty-one per cent of the 3.6 mile long highway would be covered by plazas that could be used "for park purposes", according to Shaw.

This is the same plan Tennessee transportation officials submitted to former DOT secretary William Coleman last year. It subsequently was withdrawn when Coleman announced that his under secretary, John Barnum, would decide whether the plan was acceptable.

Barnum, it was feared, was too much of an environmentalist to give a favorable ruling, so the state withdrew the plan, hoping Coleman's and Barnum's successors would be more sympathetic.

The plaza design was praised yesterday by every person at the meeting with Adams except Adams and his assistants.

Sen. Howard Baker said he had never seen a better presentation. "It's time for this project to be built," he said.

Gov. Ray Blanton said the plan "is not only feasible, it's acceptable. He said it would take a minimum amount of park land, and that because of the addition of

the plazas, would actually add to the esthetics of the park. It would even add to rather than detract from the Overton Park zoo, he said.

Blanton said he told Adams that there is an "outcry" in Memphis for the highway's completion and that less than 2 per cent of the citizens opposes it.

Sen. Jim Sasser said he too believes the plan is a good one and should be accepted by Adams. Those comments were echoed by Reps. Robin Beard and Ed Jones, Mayors Wyeth Chandler and Ray Nixon, and City Council chairman Oscar Edmonds.

Adams, who is the fifth DOT secretary to study the Overton park situation, declined to comment on the merits of the proposal, saying only that he would examine it and make a decision within the next 30 to 60 days.

The only other comment he had to make was that he was impressed with the presentation made by the Tennesseans. They not only had diagrams of what the park would look like but a 22-minute slide show.

Even if Adams does approve the plan, the state still would have to face the environmentalists in court.

Whether the state has to pay for the whole project or just 10 per cent of it depends on how the courts view the plaza design.

If the court rules in favor of the environmentalists again, congressmen from Tennessee would then try to get legislation passed in Congress to "remove" the 3.6 mile segment from the interstate system. It would then become a state project and the state could build the highway anyway it chose.

Blanton and Shaw were hesitant to discuss that possibility but they acknowledged that making it a state project is one alternative — possibly the only alternative.

"We don't even want to think about that right now because of the cost to Tennessee taxpayers, but it is an alternative," Shaw said.

If the highway can be built as a part of the new interstate system, the Federal government would pay 90 per cent of the project cost.

If it can only be built as a state project, the route would be straight through the park — not partially depressed and not partly covered — and would cost Tennesseans an estimated \$22 million.

Twenty-two years ago, it would have cost \$2 million, said Shaw.

OPF 30-18