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"I-40 Park Route Has Coleman's Approval, Harold Ford Says"

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I-40 Park Route Has Coleman's Approval, Harold Ford Says

Rep. Harold Ford (D-Memphis) said yesterday U.S. Secretary of Transportation W. T. Coleman Jr. had decided Interstate 40 should be built through Overton Park.

The Memphis representative, who sat beside the secretary at lunch in Washington yesterday, said Coleman has not decided what design should be implemented, "but in the next 10 days there should be some information forthcoming in regard to the Overton Park expressway.

"I did get a flat commitment from him that it will be completed and that an announcement will be made in 10 days," Ford said upon returning to Memphis yesterday afternoon.

Senators Howard Baker and Bill Brock have both said recently that the secretary is nearing a decision on the I-40 route, but neither would speculate on how Coleman was expected to rule.

Ford said Coleman made no commitment yesterday as to which route he prefers.

"The only commitment he made to me is that he is going to order it to be completed," Ford said.

An aide to Coleman contacted in Washington late yesterday said, "No statement has been made (by Coleman) and no decision has been made" in relation to the Overton Park expressway.

The aide, who was familiar with the case, said that he was aware that Coleman and Ford had chatted during on NAACP luncheon honoring Rep. Barbara Jordan (D-Texas) but insisted no decision has been made.

When former Transportation Secretary Claude S. Brinegar ruled out an open, but partially depressed, I-40 route through Overton Park shortly before he left office in January, he called for evaluation of three remaining alternatives.

The three plans for the unfinished 3.7-mile strip of interstate were:

- A cut-and-cover tunnel to partially submerge I-40 traffic under the park, a project Tennessee highway officials



Sen. Bill Brock



W. T. Coleman Jr.



Rep. Harold Ford

estimated last October would cost \$178.4 million, compared to \$17.6 million for the rejected "open-cut" design.

- A route that would take I-40 around Overton Park to the north, with a cut-

and-cover tunnel past Southwestern and Parkway House to a point east of Hawthorne.

- And a no-build plan under which the state would abandon the idea of ever closing the park gap and try to

provide for traffic through improvement of arterial streets and bus service.

But Ford's statement yesterday would eliminate the last two choices.

However, the Memphis Democrat mentioned a new alternative which would take the expressway "over the park."

Ford said he is "pleased and satisfied to know the new transportation secretary is willing to look into the problem here and willing to get something going one way or another.

"I certainly don't want to do anything to destroy the park, but at the same time we have just got to do something.

"I am willing to compromise with a cut-and-cover plan or going over the park. We have waited for 19 years and we can wait no longer. In the next 10 days we'll have an answer."

The Overton Park expressway link has been the subject of a confrontation between environmentalists determined

to keep the park from being damaged by construction of the interstate through the park and area residents who need better access to and through downtown Memphis.

Baker, who has been pressuring Coleman for a decision, said April 7 that the secretary "indicated he wants very much to produce a decision. He asked if I could give him a few more days and I agreed. He said, 'Give me a week,' and I said, 'All right.'"

And Brock, who toured the park April 3 with newsmen and a trail of protesters objecting to the park route said, "I am not qualified to say one route is better than another" and added he thought Coleman would make a decision in "several weeks."

Under federal environmental laws the transportation secretary must find there is no "prudent and feasible" alternative to sending a federal aid highway through a public park.