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"The Park Connection"

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THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

A Scripps-Howard Newspaper

MICHAEL GREHL, Editor

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JOSEPH R. WILLIAMS, Business Manager

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Sunday, July 11, 1976

Section G

The Park Connection

WE'RE RIGHT BACK where we started and after 20 years of wrangling in and out of court it still will be several more years before Interstate 40 is connected in — or out of — Overton Park. If ever it is.

The state's proposal for a depressed roadway through the park is similar to one rejected by former Transportation Secretary Claude Brinegar in January, 1975. But the new plan is a modification, with the roadway being partially covered by plazas, providing greenery and at the same time allowing natural ventilation for the expressway.

It appears to be a practical plan, one which should satisfy the environmentalists who have opposed an Overton Park expressway from the beginning. It won't, of course, and we can look forward to more court fights even if it is approved by Transportation Secretary William Coleman.

His decision will come only after the state holds hearings here on Aug. 11-12, and it is certain that those hearings will be full of passionate dissension. Antis can always be counted on to comprise an audience majority at any hearing. It is up to the proponents to attend and let themselves be heard too.

A poll conducted by The Commercial Appeal early this year showed 65 per cent of those questioned (in all parts of the city) wanted immediate completion of the park portion of the expressway. This is in opposition to 24 per cent who were against it and 11 per cent undecided. In an area breakdown, the percentage favoring completion by residents of East Memphis and South Memphis was even greater. And midtown residents, who would use it less than any and who live near Overton Park, favored completion by 60 per cent with 32 per cent against and 8 per cent undecided. This should tell us something.

OPPONENTS QUOTE the law in their constant fight. We quote the law, the "Parklands Statute," in part: "... The secretary shall not approve any program or project which requires the use of any publicly owned land from a public park,

recreation area . . . unless (1) there is no feasible and prudent alternative to the use of such land, and (2) such program includes all possible planning to minimize harm to such park, recreational area . . ."

In the first place, "prudent" has to do with good judgment, common sense. It is plain common sense that the expressway, barricaded at either end of the park, be joined there. "Feasible" has to do with practicability, and it is certainly feasible from a standpoint of cost and as a convenience to a public majority that the park route be used.

No one can argue the "all possible planning" part of the law. How many hours have been consumed in planning and how many plans have been submitted?

But the key phrase is "to minimize harm." The law does not say to prevent any harm to the area, just as it shouldn't. Since the first permanent settlement at Jamestown in 1607 the people have disturbed the environment in order to exist in social communities. As the nation has grown the disturbance has increased, and it is well that in recent years there has been more attention paid to the preservation of nature and recognition of its necessary contribution to our lives. But in some cases extremism takes over to the detriment of social progress.

THERE MAY BE a feasible alternative. But the public is not convinced.

Under the latest state plan, the project would cost \$30 million to build, as opposed to the \$180 million price tag on the proposed tunnel. The state proposal estimates maintenance at about \$100,000 a year in comparison to \$1 million annually for the tunnel, a figure beyond reality.

The hearing should not rehash old issues and old passions, but should be devoted to find a route legally and financially prudent and one that serves the purpose for which the expressway was originally designed. No plan will satisfy everyone.

This debate has gone on too long. Work should start.

