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| Authors | Flynn, Brown Alan |
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Overton Route Advocates Dismayed, Shocked—Opponents Celebrate

By BROWN ALAN FLYNN

Press-Scimitar Staff Writer

Surprise and dismay were expressed today by proponents of the proposed Interstate 40 route through Overton Park, while opponents of the route celebrated.

Both reactions were prompted by the decision by Secretary of Transportation John Volpe today that the current proposal for a partially-depressed route through the park has been rejected.

"I'm stunned by it (Volpe's decision)," said Robert Smith, state Commissioner of Transportation.

"This will only cause further delays. It will impose a great deal of hardships on the people of Memphis, and on the economy of the area."

He said he believes "99 per cent of the people of Memphis" favor the route through the park. He said he will meet with his attorneys to see what alternatives are available.

"I can't understand how Volpe reached this decision," said Smith. "I'm stunned and shocked."

Dr. Arlo Smith, president of the Citizens to Preserve Overton Park, said leaders of the group got word on the decision about 5 p.m. yesterday from their attorneys.

"A member of the Transportation Department released the information to us," he

said. "Coincidentally, we had a regularly scheduled meeting of our board of directors last night and we were able to make the announcement at the meeting.

"Everyone was so pleased and excited we suspended the meeting for a celebration."

"I feel great about Secretary Volpe's decision, but I'm not sure what the whole thing implies yet since I haven't actually read the decision.

"We were as anxious as the Chamber of Commerce for Volpe to make the decision before he left office. In light of the Supreme Court decision and the hearing here we felt it was the only logical decision."

John Vardaman, attorney for the environmentalists who opposed the route, was ecstatic over the decision.

"It is an extraordinary victory," he said. "Under the law, the secretary cannot approve the highway through the park unless he finds he can't find a feasible alternative route — that's what we said all along."

He repeated it was a complete victory for his side and praised Volpe for making the determination. "It will have a tremendous benefit in Memphis because it will preserve Overton Park, but we think it will have national repercussions," he said. "It will be a clear indication to highway planners that the environmental laws mean what they say

and that they will be strictly enforced, not only by the courts but by the Department of Transportation as well."

Mrs. Sunshine Snyder, a plaintiff along with the Overton Park group in the Federal Court lawsuit which led to Volpe's reconsideration of the Overton Park route, said she feels the decision "vindicates our position all the way.

"I feel we don't need the (mid-town) expressway at all. The thing is obsolete and I personally feel it doesn't meet national safety standards, with respect to air pollution or road safety.

"I think the average man in Memphis is the victor in this case."

Another longtime opponent of the Overton Park route is Mrs. Sara Hines, a member of the Environmental Action Council and the local chapter of the Sierra Club.

"I just think it's the greatest news I've heard in many a day," said Mrs. Hines. "I hope now we'll finish the long-delayed north-ern I-240 segment.

"The great thing about this decision is that Volpe recognizes our laws that protect our park lands. I don't think they will take any more park land too quickly."

She added that the northern I-240 expressway leg will be able to handle all the traffic which the new interstate bridge will carry.

Mayor Wyeth Chandler, on hearing about

the decision, said: "I understand federal money for finishing the expressway through Overton Park will be withheld unless we tunnel under or go some other route. I'm very concerned about the future of the Overton Park expressway. I cannot understand Secretary Volpe's changing his mind after all this time. Part of his decision was based on noise pollution, which is not involved anyway.

"I want to talk with the state to see if there is any chance to use state funds to put the expressway through the park. If we have to have another route, the only one I see feasible would be to use the south side of North Parkway and the north edge of the park along the zoo. I'm very disappointed with the decision."

Mrs. Michael Lackner, president of Council for a Greener Memphis, said her group is considering filing a lawsuit against the state Department of Highways, the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce and other proponents of the Overton Park route.

"We want to recover damages for what we consider irresponsible action in proceeding with the construction of an engineering and civic disaster," she said.

Mrs. Lackner said the state was told by Judge Bailey Brown that it would "proceed at its own risk" in going ahead with construction of portions of the expressway leading to Overton Park.

"They went jolly well ahead," she said. "Now we'd like to recover that money."

William W. Deupree, another plaintiff in the lawsuit to block the expressway through the park, expressed pleasure at Volpe's decision.

"I want to see the park preserved," he said. "I feel like the expressway could perhaps be routed to the south of the park and definitely could go to the north of the park.

"But tunneling under the park would hurt the park in my opinion.

"We just don't need the expressway, not as much as we need to preserve Overton Park."

George Houston, president of Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce in 1970, and chairman of the chamber's executive board in 1971, said:

"It is a sad, sad day for the citizens of Memphis, and a shame and a disgrace for the national reputation of Memphis. The fact we have an expressway that spans from North Carolina on the east coast to California on the West Coast, stretching some 3,000 miles with less than a mile to be completed, and with that uncompleted distance all inside the city limits of Memphis makes it a shame and disgrace. The Overton Park expressway project has been one of the most exasperating and frustrating experiences I have ever been involved in."

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