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Roman forums may get facelifting

BY ANDREW MARTON

ROME (UPI)—For the first time in nearly 1,000 years you may soon be able to walk through the Roman forums as the ancient emperors did—without dodging cars or tourist buses.

A proposal to excavate sections of five imperial forums and join them into one archaeological park is being considered jointly by the Rome city administration and the Italian government. If passed, the project will require the partial closure of one of Rome's busiest streets.

"This project would allow the public to see the whole Roman Forum complex as it was before the Middle Ages, to appreciate its unique continuity," said Giulio Carlo Argan, the 72-year-old former mayor of Rome and noted art historian.

The proposed excavation which would add about 3 hectares to the 60 hectare forum complex, was conceived by superintendent of archaeological monuments Adriano La Regina, 43.

"This project will allow us to change the present situation where many of Rome's ancient and fragile monuments border traffic-congested avenues, causing damaging pollution," La Regina said.

Experts agree that pollution from automobile exhaust and residential heating units, along with traffic vibration, is causing possibly irreparable damage to Rome's ruins. Argan says "the traffic must be controlled now or we may lose the priceless heritages we have preserved."

La Regina, Argan and other urban planners are calling for the partial closing and excavation of the 6-km Via dei Fori Imperiali.

Under 500 meters of the boulevard, archaeologists hope to unearth extensive gardens, pedestrian malls and paths joining the Roman Forum with the Imperial forums of Caesar, Trajan, Augustus and Nero, and the Forum of Peace.

The Roman Forum, constructed in a marshy valley between two of Rome's seven hills, dates from the 3rd century B.C. Until just before the Christian era it was the political, social and cultural heart of the city, where Romans gathered to celebrate religious festivals, to watch executions of political criminals or barter with local merchants.

As the population of ancient Rome grew, its emperors built adjacent squares, filling them with statues, porticos, inscriptions and temples dedicated to various gods.

"Part of probably the most extensive set of historic monuments is under five meters of highway in the middle of Rome," said La Regina. "All we are proposing is that a

road, filled only by a river of cars and nothing else, be converted into an extension of the unique museum we already have."

The Via dei Fori Imperiali was built by Mussolini in 1932 as a ceremonial parade route between his office at the piazza Venezia and the nearby colosseum. Some of the project's opponents feel excavating the boulevard would destroy a part of Italian history.

La Regina brushes at the criticism, saying "the street was constructed without any consideration of the historic layout of the city. Mussolini built it without thinking of the archaeological treasures it could bury."

Other critics charge that closing off part of the avenue will further snarl Rome traffic. During busy periods, this main artery carries between 2,000 and 2,200 cars per hour in each direction.

"We don't want to block off the whole area," says La Regina. "We only feel it should not be a throughfare where people just drive through."

To promote the new plan, the city has closed the area to traffic every Sunday since February.

"On Sunday, I see more people, often carrying archaeological guides to the ruins, able to move freely without worrying about the traffic," said La Regina.