

'Time to let go' of giant walnut

Tree
Santa Cruz landmark
falling to severe rot

BY PAUL ROGERS
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City tree trimmers will cut most of the limbs off the biggest, oldest, most recognizable tree in downtown Santa Cruz on Friday. Three arborists say it is severely rotted and in danger of collapse.

Like a family tearfully putting an aging pet to its last sleep, city leaders describe the work as a painful yet unavoidable chore.

Decades of shade

The tree, a 50-foot-high eastern black walnut, stands in a public parking lot at Cedar and Union streets. Believed to be 109 years old, it provided Santa Cruz residents shade for decades in a garden behind the old Pacific Ocean House, a 150-room hotel built in 1866 and demolished in the early 1960s.

For much of the past 70 years, the area has been a parking lot. Most recently, the site was the lot behind the old Bookshop Santa Cruz building, until that structure was demolished in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

Now the tree is in its final years, said Mike DiDonato, a member of the Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Commission, which voted 4-0 Monday night to remove about 70 percent of the top branches.

'Time has come'

"There isn't anybody who doesn't want to save that tree," said DiDonato. "But you reach in and you grab nothing but rotten wood. You know its time has come."

The decision came after six years of study and nursing by city landscape workers. The tree

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Santa Cruz city arborist Ray Sherrod inspects the doomed landmark tree at Cedar and Union streets.

City to lose another landmark tree

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is held in such high esteem, for example, that in 1988, when construction crews paving a nearby parking lot left heavy machinery around its base, at least 15 people locked arms around the tree trunk, fearing it was going to be cut.

"They were just people off the street," said city arborist Ray Sherrod. "I couldn't believe it. It warmed my heart."

The average life span for walnut trees is 75 to 100 years, said Sherrod.

In 1989, he first noticed the tips dying. After some minor pruning, the city installed drip irrigation systems, added fertilizer and tied support cables to hold up sagging limbs. Finally, Sherrod

and another arborist recommended the tree be cut down entirely because they felt it was in danger of collapse.

"One of these limbs could kill somebody if it fell on a car," he said.

Several dozen people protested. The city enlisted a third arborist, who removed bark and found that rotting was much more comprehensive than previously thought.

To be sold to artists

The chopped wood will be sold to artists, said Sherrod. They will be asked to carve interpretive signs for city parks or a sculpture. The tree will be replaced, probably with another standing about 20 feet high.

Recent years have been bad for landmark trees in Santa Cruz. After the earthquake, every tree on

Pacific Avenue was cut down to install new sidewalks, underground pipes and streets. More than 250 new trees were planted. Afterward, a huge pepper tree in front of Calvary Episcopal Church died. A 100-foot redwood near City Hall was killed by choking vines. And a huge magnolia behind Loudon Nelson Center is 90 percent dead.

Strict ordinance

There are about 16,000 urban trees in Santa Cruz city parks and along streets. The city also has a strict tree ordinance, which prohibits private landowners from cutting any tree wider than 44 inches around without a permit.

"People around here care so much about their natural heritage," said Sherrod. "But in some cases, trees die. There's a time to let go of everything."