

Bound for Gilroy

Tree Circus leaving Scotts Valley

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SCOTTS VALLEY — The once-famous, now-neglected Tree Circus here is in the process of being moved to Gilroy, and the city can do nothing about it.

City Administrator Bob Rockett told The Sentinel this morning that the city has no jurisdiction to stop the move. He said a permit isn't even required since the City Council last year excluded the Tree Circus from its tree-protection ordinance.

The plan is to move 29 of the odd-looking trees to Tree Haven Nursery in Gilroy. The move will take many months to complete, with the trees being boxed now, but not actually being moved until fall.

Tree Haven is a wholesale nursery specializing in large, boxed trees. It is owned by Michael Bonfante, owner of the Nob Hill Food chain.

Bonfante said this morning that he plans to eventually utilize the trees in his proposed amusement park at his Hecker Pass Highway property in Gilroy. The

proposal has been described as "part Disneyland and part Casa de Fruta."

Bonfante said he has been negotiating with Robert Hogan, the owner of the property on Scotts Valley Drive which contains the Tree Circus, for some time. He said he purchased the trees and does not believe city permits are required to remove them since they sit on private property.

Hogan told The Sentinel that he is donating the trees to Tree Haven. He said he has no plans at present to develop the one-acre parcel.

The Tree Circus is a collection of 40 or so unusually-shaped, grafted living trees. They were created by the late Axel Erlandson in 1946, who had hopes of turning it into a tourist attraction.

The circus once made Life magazine and Ripley's Believe It or Not in the 1950s. In the '60s, it was part of the Lost World tourist attraction. Hogan bought the property in 1977 with the idea of turning it into a commercial development at some point.

Rockett said the council purposely ex-

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cluded the Tree Circus from its tree protection ordinance in January, 1984, because they were so concerned with saving the trees. They set up a special committee which recommended the trees be incorporated into some kind of commercial development on the property, which never came about.

Looking back, Rockett said it may have been a mistake not to include the property in the ordinance. "At least if we had, it would have at least required a permit to be obtained and some city jurisdiction."

Raul Padilla, foreman of Bonfante's 12-man crew, said it will take several weeks for them to safely dig and box the 29 trees. The trees will then sit until fall, being watered and fertilized and generally brought back into shape. He said they won't actually move the trees to Gilroy until fall.

"We're only taking the ones we feel we can save," Padilla said. "Two of them are pretty bad, but I'm counting on being able to save all of them."

The trees include those with names of the shapes they permanently hold — the watertower tree, a country boy's slingshot, the boa constrictor and the four-legged giant. Some are upwards of 40-feet high; many appear dead already without any new foliage.

Santa Cruz architect Mark Primack, who has led past efforts to save the circus, maintained the move may be the best thing for the trees. He chastised the city of Scotts Valley for not protecting them in the past, noting there once were 74 trees.

"Any other city but Scotts Valley would have listed these trees as a historical asset," Primack said. "If no one had come along to move the trees, they all would die. I can't fault somebody for taking the trees out of Scotts Valley."

The Tree Circus made headlines two years ago when volunteers ignored the risk of trespassing charges to water and restore the trees.

Volunteers have attempted to save the trees many times in the past. Once, five years ago, the trees were going to go to Southern California to a landscape designer whose designs graced the estates of Herb Alpert and Bob Dylan. That deal also fell through.