

Historic pepper tree must go

Ailing tree doomed, committee decides

By KAREN CLARK
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The ailing pepper tree at the Calvary Episcopal Church is on its last limbs.

"It's not going to get any better," said Ray Sherrod, the city's arborist. "Maybe we could prolong the life of the tree by watching it disintegrate."

The landmark tree at Cedar and Lincoln streets was given a reprieve by the City Council in July when members asked that a special committee look for alternatives to the chain saw.

"After hearing from staff, time and energy might be better spent focusing on a worthy replacement rather than trying to keep the tree alive," said Councilman Scott Kennedy, who served on the committee.

That replacement may well be the magnolia tree in front of the Camouflage shop on Pacific Avenue.

That's the deal worked out by the church and the committee, although the council still has to approve the permit to cut down the tree.

The reconstruction work in the mall has doomed the existing trees, and this would be a way to save one of them, said officials.

At issue since last October has been the church's request to remove the heritage tree, which is sick with oak root fungus.

Officials were worried a falling branch could injure one of the many people who sit under the downtown tree.

But the Sierra Club was among those that objected to removing the 100-plus-year-old tree.

Representative Deborah Malkin said at the council meeting in July that she had talked with arborists who claimed the tree could be saved.

But Sherrod said that further study in August revealed that is not the case.

"There is no known fungicide to eradicate oak root fungus," said Sherrod. "Eighty-five percent of the root system is gone. Only 15 percent on one side of the tree is holding it up."

He estimated it would take about \$4,500 over the next three years to keep



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The City Council still must approve the removal of Calvary Church's pepper tree.

the tree alive, but it wouldn't be healthier.

"It won't get any better; it just won't," said Sherrod, adding that the necessary pruning could mean "it would end up looking like a stick with three or four things sticking off it."

In a report to the council distributed Tuesday, Kennedy and Councilwoman Katherine Beiers acknowledged that saving the tree "seemed not a viable option."

Sherrod said if the church formally accepts the magnolia tree, cost estimates would be worked out with a tree mover.

City officials in the past have been pessimistic about saving planter-box trees on the mall because of the cost.

Trees planted at grade level are not expected to survive the underground reconstruction work because roots likely will be woven around the pipes that must be replaced, said officials.

The planter-box trees wouldn't have that problem. The cost to transplant, however, would be high

"The cost to save those trees would be twice the cost to go out and buy the same trees," said Jim Lang, director of the Parks and Recreation Department.

But in addition to saving one to re-

place the pepper tree, said Lang, others might be saved by the interest of a nurseryman in Gilroy.

The nursery owner, Michael Bonfonte, likes to save "unique specimens and things that he probably couldn't buy in a commercial nursery," said Lang. "By going through him, maybe we can save more of the trees in the raised planters."

Malkin, the lawyer who represented the Sierra Club in the initial protest, said she was "disappointed that the tree couldn't be saved."

"But I also appreciate the church giving the tree a second chance."