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Sandy Springs residents keep watchful eye on old tree
Widening project will put road close to massive water oak

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Sandy Springs has thousands if not millions of trees. Only one is protected by red satin ribbon draped around its limbs.

The ribbon is meant to reassure neighbors and warn contractors: The massive water oak is being watched. In a city where redevelopment has felled many trees, some residents don't want to take a chance on losing this one.

The tree on Abernathy Road is among the oldest in the city. Some arborists believe the tree is almost 100 years old; others think it could be closer to 125. Its trunk, rippled with age, measures 66 inches across. Its canopy reaches over the road and deep into its property.

The tree is supposed to be a highlight of a new city park along Abernathy, which is in the initial phase of development. Sandy Springs officials say they intend to save the water oak.

But the widening of Abernathy from two to four lanes will bring the expanded commuter road and sidewalk close to the tree. Arborists say design and construction crews will have to take it into account if it's going to survive.

Jerrie Woodward has lived on Abernathy for 40 years. The tree has a special status in the neighborhood, she said. Many people have stopped by her house, she said, and inquired about it.

"If there is a specimen tree, it's that tree," Woodward said.

Spence Rosenfeld, president of the tree company Arboguard, inspected the oak this week at the request of Trees Sandy Springs, a nonprofit that is trying to preserve the city's trees.

"It's a magnificent tree," Rosenfeld said. "It gives us a little taste of the past, honestly. An appreciation for something that has stood in this same spot for 70 to 80 years."

He and other arborists agree that it's healthy and it could live for another 40 years. If Nina Cramer has her way, it will.

Cramer, president of Trees Sandy Springs, got a slew of e-mails and calls after a house that stood behind the tree was demolished to make way for the city park.

Residents noticed the old water oak had an orange tag stuck in the center of its trunk and worried it was marked for death. City officials say the marker is innocuous — part of an inventory effort.

Sandy Springs will coordinate with the state Department of Transportation, which is widening Abernathy, on

ways to protect the tree, said Jon Drysdale, the city's deputy director of public works.

"The city's going to go to extra lengths to try to protect it during construction," he said.

Cramer and other tree watchers aren't taking any chances.

Cramer tossed some of her unused holiday ribbon over the tree limbs this week, finishing it off with a bow. On Wednesday, with the city's permission, she watered the tree and spread mulch around its base. She plans to install a chain-link security fence around the root zone. All will help protect it through construction, she said.

"Accidents happen; mistakes are made," she said.


Michael Barnett, the city's arborist, wasn't surprised to learn people were worried about the old oak. He credits its prominence on Abernathy, a busy commuting route from East Cobb to Ga. 400. Some 22,000 motorists pass the tree daily.

Like other city officials, Barnett said the park will include the tree.

"It's one of the nicest specimens of a water oak I've ever seen," he said. "Everyone will try to work to save it."

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