



BOB FOWLER/NEWS SENTINEL

An arborist has determined that 55 maple trees that line the Oak Ridge Turnpike are slowly being choked to death by their root system and should be removed. The state Department of Transportation is about to do so, spokesman Travis Brickey says.

Turnpike's trees must go

Discovery of problem with root system means maples will fall for roadway widening

BY BOB FOWLER

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OAK RIDGE — Despite near-heroic efforts to save them, the trees have to go.

That's the reluctant conclusion involving 55 stately old maple trees that line a section of Oak Ridge Turnpike that's being widened.

The state even shifted plans for a stretch of the turnpike project six feet north in a bid to save the maples.

The trees line a half-mile stretch of the south side of the turnpike from its intersection with West Vanderbilt Drive to near Illinois Avenue.

They are an estimated 45 to 50 years old and shade a gently sloping bank in front of apartment buildings.

When work on the turnpike widening

began, the contractor placed orange plastic fences around each tree, showcasing the original intent to save them.

"We wanted to save as many trees as possible, but we knew they were going to be in jeopardy," said Tennessee Department of Transportation spokesman Travis Brickey.

"What we kept coming back to is if we're not taking the trees, we're going to come pretty darn close to them."

When a need to shift a water line relocation arose, TDOT let the city know it wanted to take out the trees.

The city in response paid for a last-ditch study by an arborist to see if the trees were in good shape.

While they look healthy, nearly all of the trees are slowly being choked to death by a girdling root system, the tree expert concluded.

That circular mesh of tightly wound and woven roots either cuts off or restricts the movement of nutrients and water within the trees.

Nearly 60 percent of the trees need to be removed immediately because they are a "hazard potential," according to Jim Cortese of Cortese Tree Specialists Inc. of Knoxville.

A sudden, sharp wind out of the south could cause those trees to topple at any time, Cortese said Monday.

When it comes to such dangers, "public safety overrides idealistic efforts," he said.

"We had no idea they were in such poor health," Oak Ridge City Engineer Steve Byrd said of the trees.

Plans now call for the trees to be removed as soon as possible.

Byrd said the state at first proposed building concrete retaining walls in front of 16 of the trees in its bid to save them.

Now, Byrd said, the city wants the state to use money earmarked for that work for new landscaping along that area.

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