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Gwinnett Place tree may be 100 or older

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DULUTH — A funny thing happened Monday morning when two tree experts visited a giant oak at Interstate 85 and Pleasant Hill Road.

"Our measuring tape wasn't large enough to fit around it," said Dale Higdon, a senior forester with the Georgia Forestry Commission.

After failing to wrap the metal band around the massive trunk, Higdon and Steve Pettis, a county agricultural extension agent, eyeballed the remaining gap and gauged the tree to be 22 feet around.

"That's very big. I'd say it's actually the size of a Volkswagen," Pettis said while describing the tree trunk Monday afternoon.

The state Department of Transportation decided last week to spare the Southern red oak when it adds new lanes to I-85 this summer, and Higdon and Pettis inspected the tree Monday to see what steps should be taken to ensure its survival during the construction process.

DOT initially planned to remove the tree that looms beside the access ramp for I-85 north, but changed its mind after a Gwinnett Place business group asked the department to leave it in place.

Pettis said the tree has occupied the spot for at least a century, and possibly for more than 150 years. That would mean the tree was standing when Sherman burned Atlanta during the Civil War, and well before Henry Ford invented the Model T, bringing automobiles to the masses.

Now about 200,000 vehicles pass by the tree daily on I-85, and the state must overhaul the nearby interchange with Ga. Highway 316 to accommodate the growing volume of cars and trucks.

The lanes that will go beside I-85 will let motorists jump between Pleasant Hill Road and Ga. 316 without merging onto the interstate's main travel lanes.

Higdon, who visited the tree on his own initiative, said it is healthy and should survive the road building if the correct steps are taken by DOT, which he intends to speak with in coming days.

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Those who lobbied for the sprawling, 100-foot-tall tree have nothing to fear, said DOT spokeswoman Teri Pope. She said about three branches closest to the interstate ramp will be "slightly trimmed" to ensure they do not fall on the road during storms. "It will probably do the tree some good," she said. While the tree is exceptionally big, it's not the largest Southern red oak. One in Upson County has a trunk that measures 26 feet around, making it the state champion for that species, Pettis said. Still, the Gwinnett Place oak is noteworthy. "I've been working in Gwinnett for 28 years and that tree is one of the landmark trees in the county," Higdon said. "This is the first time I've ever measured a tree like that and the tape wasn't large enough."

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