

'Miracle on Bridge Street'

BLUFFTON: Many pull together to move town's first Christmas tree.

It was weather fit only for ducks and fish and, well, the 30-foot-tall red cedar being moved from its home on Calhoun Street to the front of Bluffton Town Hall.

The tree -- the town's original, official Christmas tree -- was moved from its former home, where its owners plan to build a new business, to the Town Hall in the rain Thursday morning.

A giant tree spade dug swiftly under it, plucked it out of the ground, and trucked it across town to the cheers of a trio of well-wishers who showed up to watch.

Forty-five minutes after the leafy surgery started, the 30-year-old tree had a new home. It now towers over Town Hall instead of under the big beech that threatened to someday strangle it.

The cedar will be decorated in time for tonight's annual Christmas tree lighting. If all goes well, it should survive to be decorated again and again.

Tree expert Woody Morris, who operated the **spade** Thursday morning, said the key to the tree's survival is water, and lots of it. Town officials promised to give it what it needs.

The tree began life as a volunteer, taking root about 30 years ago on the empty lot across Calhoun Street from The Store, where Babbie Guscio, who owns both The Store and the lot, soon began decorating it.

Guscio recalls plastering it with peanut butter pine cones, strings of popcorn and lights. Former Mayor Morraine Whitney, she says, officially recognized it as the town's Christmas tree.

Guscio said the tree was last decorated about eight years ago, mainly because it had grown so big that no one could reach its top, leaving big chunks of the tree bare of lights or decorations.

Bluffton Public Works Director Harold Cooler plans to use a donated cherry picker to decorate it now.

The lot will soon be developed, Guscio said, although no plans for anything have yet been filed with the town. In any case, the cedar would have been in the way. Neither Guscio nor her husband, Don, wanted to cut it down so they

offered it to the town.

That fit in with enough other coincidences that Bluffton Town Manager Bruce Behrens has taken to calling the tree's move the "miracle on Bridge Street." Town Hall is on Bridge Street.

The whole thing started weeks ago when Mayor Hank Johnston, Town Clerk Sandra Lunceford and Cooler were talking about the town's seeming inability to keep a Christmas tree alive. Several have died in front of Town Hall. Johnston suggested the town should get a bigger one. No one had any idea where to look.

Town planner Laura Bailey overheard and called Morris of TreeStock Enterprises, who had successfully transplanted huge trees at Belfair and Oldfield, and asked him to help.

Morris agreed and offered a big cedar he had rescued during the widening of S.C. 170. Bailey told her boss, Pam McFarland, about the offer. McFarland, in turn, said that Guscio had mentioned her desire to save her big red cedar from development.

Van Pitts, Palmetto Bluff's tree expert, volunteered his services. Morris offered his machines. The Bluffton Township Fire Department offered water -- 200 gallons on Wednesday alone. Hargray donated Cooler's cherry picker.

"It's almost miraculous," Bailey said. "Word of mouth, it got around, it was perfect timing. It could not have worked out more perfectly. It has totally put me in the Christmas spirit. It's making my Christmas, I'll tell you that."

The tree, a native Southern species, will work perfectly in the landscaping plan Bailey and others are preparing for the front of Town Hall, where grass was ripped up last summer when a new roof was installed.

The plan calls for the use of only native species, including, coincidentally, a centerpiece red cedar.

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