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Device helps show whether trees are dangerous (NY)

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | Misty Edgecomb | November 2, 2005

Several years ago, a decaying tree on the grounds of the George Eastman House threatened to fall onto East Avenue or crash into the historic mansion itself. City foresters eventually decided to remove the tree for safety's sake, but not without a lengthy dispute over whether the potential danger trumped history and aesthetics.

Today, new technology would allow arborists to see inside such a tree to precisely gauge the extent of the damage. The system is based on ground-penetrating radar developed by the military and uses electromagnetic signals to sense cracks, hollows and rotten wood.

"It's basically a virtual drill," Tony Mucciardi of TreeRadar Inc. told local arborists Tuesday during a visit to Rochester. The company is based in Silver Springs, Md.

At \$17,500, tree radar isn't something to rush out and buy at the local hardware store. Just nine systems have been sold worldwide since it went on the market a few months ago.

The closest to Rochester is a U.S. Forest Service system based in Vermont. But this week, Rochester Gas and Electric Corp., the city forest service and dozens of local arborists and foresters checked out the technology as Mucciardi toured the state.

Within a few years, the company expects that arborists across the country will be offering tree radar analysis to homeowners for a few hundred dollars.

Tree experts have always used clues such as the presence of animal nesting holes or particular types of fungus to build the case that a tree is becoming dangerous, but without drilling holes into the trunk, there was no way of knowing for sure until this technology emerged, said Brian Eshenaur of Cornell Cooperative Extension-Monroe County.

Many of Rochester's streets have decades-old trees that need constant monitoring, and because of preservation ordinances, cannot be removed without convincing evidence, said Richard Nolan, a forestry technician.

Rochester won't likely make the investment in tree radar any time soon, but Nolan can see its benefit. "Occasionally, we run into cases where they don't want trees taken down for any reason ... this is a very good way to show everybody (that a problem exists)," he said.

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