

Prized 750-ton rain tree moved to new home—critics fear it won't survive.

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Credit: A rain tree. Snavare, CC BY-SA 4.0 , via Wikimedia Commons

A majestic rain tree has lived through 100 years of nasty weather,

surviving torrential flooding, fierce storms and powerful hurricanes. But some worry the landmark tree won't survive its latest test, a journey of 50 feet that moved it closer to the New River to make way for two new high-rise apartment towers.

A year ago, the 1.5 million pound tree was hoisted into the air, roots and all, as construction crews got ready to break ground on the \$500 million project.

The tree was moved closer to the water, but not all the way to its final destination.

For nearly a year, the tree remained perched on a grassy plateau 6 feet above ground, waiting on a new seawall to be built.

At the time, developer Asi Cymbal said a collapsing seawall needed to be replaced to give the tree proper support. Work on the seawall began a few months ago and is now complete, Cymbal says.

Last week, the [rain](#) tree, still perched high up on its grassy island, was moved to its new permanent home, about 15 feet from the water's edge. The new towers, once built, will stand 30 stories high and overlook the rain tree.

"The tree was moved closer to the river on July 21 and it's in great health," Cymbal said. "Our rain tree has been preserved and relocated to her final home on the future Riverwalk, along the waterfront in downtown Fort Lauderdale. We are happy to report that her preservation has been a success. Our rain tree has never been healthier."

But critics fear the tree won't survive in its new home.

Donna Meents, whose condo looks down upon the rain tree, is keeping

close watch. She worries about the tree's branches hanging over the water.

"Now the rain tree is in place and it is in even further jeopardy," she told The South Florida Sun Sentinel. "The first time a large yacht comes down the New River to be repaired or remodeled, it will likely do damage to her branches."

This is no ordinary tree.

The state Division of Forestry declared it a "Florida Champion" in 1982, signifying the tree's status as the largest of its kind in the state. The tree, likely the largest of its species in the continental U.S., stands 80 feet high and boasts a radiant green canopy that casts shade over an area 130 feet wide.

In an attempt to protect the prized tree, [city leaders](#) granted it special protection in 1987, requiring commission approval before it can be moved or cut down.

Cymbal received permission to move the tree after agreeing to pay the city \$1 million if it dies within five years of being moved.

Derrel Thompson, a longtime fan of the tree, thinks Cymbal might end up having to fork over the \$1 million.

"Right now the tree is about 100 yards from my house," Thompson said. "It used to be 25 yards away. I know this tree really well. I know when it's supposed to bloom. I know how big the branches are supposed to be. I have lived under this tree for over 10 years."

Thompson has also kept vigil over the tree and doesn't like what he sees.

"The tree is not the same," he said. "And it's not going to rebound. The tree is still alive, but not thriving and will never recover from this move. When they cut the tree away from the roots, they cut so many roots, the tree is never going to recover. "

Kimberly Christie has a bird's eye view of tree from her ninth floor window at the Esplanade, a condo next door. She watched crews move the tree last week and even shot her own video.

"They started at 8 a.m. and were finished by noon," she said. "This is its final resting place. Instead of digging a hole to plant the tree, they're building up the soil around it."

Unlike some of her neighbors, Christie holds out hope that the tree will do well in its new spot by the river.

"It was much fuller before they moved it," she said. "It was really looking bad. But it's started to look better now due to all the rain. It's really perked up."

Ted Inserra, a Fort Lauderdale activist, has been checking on the tree almost daily on his ride in to work.

"I saw them moving the tree last week so I came over to check things out," he said. "It's now in its new home. They're trucking in dirt to raise the ground level to fit the tree."

When asked if he thinks the tree will like its new home, Inserra let out a deep sigh.

"I don't know," he said. "With all this construction around the tree, they're going to have to drill the pilings for the foundation. The tree is going to have to be strong to withstand all that vibration in the soil. And

we don't know if the root system is going to withstand that."

Inserra says he plans to still keep an eye on the tree. And he's likely not the only one.

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