

Sullivan's Is. cites owner of tree firm

BY JESSICA JOHNSON

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SULLIVAN'S ISLAND — The owner of a tree company has been cited for using heavy equipment on sand dunes after an investigation into illegally cut trees.

David Christmas, of North Charleston, the owner of Arborscape Tree Preservation, is scheduled to appear in the town's magistrate court Aug. 12.

Christmas received the citations after the Charleston County Sheriff's Office looked into hardwood trees disappearing from Sullivan's Island's public land, 90 acres of beach that has built up gradually over time.

The Sheriff's Office conducted the investigation because 21 trees were cut down in February. That's the same time that three public officials hired Arborscape to make legal cuts to various bushes and shrubs.

Arborscape employees denied removing any of the hardwood trees and said they didn't know who did.

According to the violation, Arborscape employees drove a tracked vehicle onto the dunes to remove the debris, which isn't legal.

The three public officials, Jerry Kaynard, town councilman; Nicky Bluesstein, planning commission member; and Pat Ilderton, design review board chairman, told investigators that they didn't realize that several 20- to 30-foot cedar and willow trees had

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disappeared from the protected land, between their Atlantic Avenue homes and the ocean.

The town allows property owners to hire licensed contractors to trim wax myrtle, eastern baccharis shrubs and the popcorn trees to 5 feet with a permit.

Violators can be fined \$500 and sentenced to 30 days in jail per tree or shrub.

Randy Robinson, a Sullivan's Island building official, and the island's tree consultant, Jeff Jackson, agreed that the cuts to the cedars and willows were not similar to those on legally cut shrubs, according to a letter written to Town Administrator Andy Benke.

Robinson also found a blade in a willow that typically wouldn't have been used by a professional, he wrote.

Town Prosecutor John Dodds III advised Sullivan's officials in a letter that without an eyewitness or other direct evidence, there was no legal basis for issuing any other fines.

Kaynard said he has several trees in his yard that he enjoys and wouldn't want anyone to cut them.

"I know I didn't cut any trees and I want anyone who did to be prosecuted," he said.

He said he plans to recommend strengthening the protective tree ordinance and to suggest monitoring the areas when trimming takes place.

Ilderton and Bluestein could not be reached for comment.

If Christmas is found guilty of the equipment violations, he could be fined \$1,035 for each home, and the \$5,000 bonds posted by each of the homeowners could be forfeited.