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Flames tear at heart of the Exchange

Businesses, heritage remnant go up in smoke as block gutted

By: Gabrielle Giroday and Bartley Kives
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KEN GIGLIOTTI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS Clouds of smoke billow from the fire that destroyed the Albert Street Business Block Thursday morning.

One of Winnipeg's oldest residential dwellings has been consumed by a \$430,000 fire that destroyed an Exchange District heritage building and sent heavy smoke billowing across downtown Thursday.

Shortly before 9:30 a.m., fire began tearing through the Albert Street Business Block, a low-rise commercial building between the St. Charles Hotel and the Royal Albert Arms on Albert Street. The small structure contained three street-level retail units built in the 1920s as well as the remnants of a two-storey home built in 1877, when the city was only four years old.



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WAYNE GLOWACKI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS Firefighters pour water into the building that contained the Ken Hong Restaurant and War on Music after fire gutted the block and cast a pall of smoke over downtown on Thursday morning.

By 1 p.m., when firefighters extinguished the blaze, the structure had been destroyed, along with two businesses that operated inside the block -- the Ken Hong Restaurant and War on Music, a retail co-op.

"This is the heart of the Exchange and it's burning to the ground right now," Jade Rennie-Harper, who works in the area, said when the fire was underway. "People worked so hard to make these businesses happen and they're such small businesses. This is people's lives that (are) going up in smoke right now."

Charley Justice, one of the founders of War on Music, said the business lost records, CDs and other merchandise. War on Music is insured and he's hopeful the business will survive.

The family that owns the Ken Hong Restaurant arrived at the scene while the building was burning, staring at the wreckage with moist eyes and pained expressions. Relatives declined to comment to media.

The Albert Street Business Block sustained \$400,000 in damage, city spokeswoman Tammy Melesko said. Workers were preparing to demolish the building after the fire was extinguished Thursday afternoon.

"The buildings are destroyed," lamented Ken Zaifman, who owns the numbered company that owned the block, adding he was sad for his tenants. "They had businesses and now those businesses can't operate. It's more my concern for them than for the buildings themselves."

Zaifman asked city council for permission to demolish the heritage structure in 2008 to make way for an expansion of the St. Charles Hotel, which he also owns. He was granted permission to do so only if substantial renovations were made to the hotel.

Those renovations were not made and the block remained untouched until Thursday. Zaifman said he expects the fire means the new development proposed for the site will proceed more quickly.

TROUBLES plaguing a pedestrian-friendly block officials call the gateway into the Exchange District:

ROYAL ALBERT ARMS (48 Albert St.): The 99-year-old heritage hotel has been vacant since May 2011, when the city ordered the building closed following the disruption of water service. It forced the closure of the live-music venue on the main floor and displaced a restaurant, Deseo Bistro. In December, the city issued a repair order under the vacant and derelict buildings bylaw.

ALBERT STREET BUSINESS BLOCK (38-44 Albert St.): Commercial block, with one component dating back to 1877, was destroyed by fire on Thursday.

ST. CHARLES HOTEL (22 Albert St.): Another 99-year-old heritage hotel, the St. Charles, has been vacant for three years. In February, the hotel's owner lost an appeal against a city order to install a functional water and sprinkler system.

-- Kives

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