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Gut historic buildings: Hydro

By: Aldo Santin

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At far left is the hydro substation on King Street that wants to expand to buildings on McDermot Avenue. (WAYNE GLOWACKI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)

Heritage building advocates and Exchange District residents are alarmed by Manitoba Hydro's plan to gut three historical buildings on McDermot Avenue to make way for the expansion of an area substation.

Hydro spokesman Glenn Schneider said the utility is in discussions to buy three century-old buildings on McDermot between Princess and King streets.

Schneider said Hydro needs to expand its nearby substation on King Street and the historical buildings are the logical site for an expansion.

"We've started discussions with the current property owners," Schneider said. "We're prepared to work with (city hall) to see what we can do. Keeping the building facade is maybe something that is workable."

The three buildings -- the Wilson building (288 McDermot), the Glengarry building (290 McDermot) and the Daylight building (296 McDermot) -- were recently sold to an Edmonton property-investment firm.

All three buildings are on the city's historical buildings conservation list.

Schneider said buildings that house electrical substations must be gutted of all interior floors and ceilings to accommodate the height of the electrical equipment. He said some sites are fenced, while others have only exterior walls.

Schneider said there is no timetable for the project, adding Hydro is still talking with the new owners and doesn't know if they want to sell. The owners could not be reached for comment.

Hydro's plans have drawn criticism from CentreVenture, the Exchange District Business Improvement Zone and the local residents' association.

Cindy Tugwell, executive director of Heritage Winnipeg, said she wants to know why Hydro selected these three buildings. She doesn't believe the utility's plans for the area are appropriate.

"We want to bring people and activity to the Exchange," Tugwell said.

She said the streetscape on that block of McDermot is the same as it was 100 years ago and suggested gutting the three buildings would be inappropriate.

"The recent success in the Exchange District has come from growth in retail, office and residential sectors," said Brian Timmerman, director of operations for the Exchange BIZ. "If Hydro takes away that whole block, it would affect life in the area."

John Giavedoni, chairman of the Residents of the Exchange District, said even if Hydro were to maintain the exterior brick facades of the three buildings, the plan would be devastating to the area's continued growth.

"Area businesses depend on people who work in those buildings," Giavedoni said. "Hydro's plan would create a dead zone -- there'd be no activity on that side of the street."

Giavedoni said Hydro's new headquarters building on Portage Avenue is praised for revitalizing downtown, but the substation project would have the exact opposite impact for the Exchange area.

Hart Mallin, a building owner who has developed condos in the area, said expanding an electrical substation onto such a prominent street would be devastating for the area. He said Hydro should be encouraged to relocate its existing substation and build a larger facility on a nearby site that doesn't have such a negative impact.


"This location is Hydro's first choice because of economic considerations, but it should find another location."

Ross McGowan, CEO of CentreVenture, the city's downtown economic development agency, said he's heard rumors of the proposal. He said he would oppose any plans that call for demolition of the three buildings.

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