

Hydro substation in historic buildings is 'under review'

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Manitoba Hydro says it will review plans to place an electrical substation inside three Exchange District buildings.

Manitoba Hydro appears to be putting the brakes on a plan to purchase and gut three buildings in Winnipeg's historic Exchange District to expand a high-voltage electrical substation inside the buildings' shells.

In a news release Thursday, the Crown-owned utility said it is reviewing its plan and quoted CEO Bob Brennan as saying "the corporation respects community standards and will work with interested groups to find a proposal that will work for all parties."

CBC News broke the story that the utility planned to purchase the Allen Building, Daylite Building, and Glengarry Block — three adjoining, six-storey buildings on McDermot Avenue that are on the city's buildings conservation list — to house the expansion of an electrical substation.

Hydro said it would save the façades of the three properties but wanted them because the utility needs the space to augment power capacity in the city's downtown.

Local residents and some civic politicians were quick to condemn the idea, saying it would create a dead zone in the Exchange District, which has come alive in recent years with art galleries, restaurants and savvy young businesses.

It is also an area where many people have chosen to live.

Developer shocked

Bill Thiessen, who has developed and sold several condominium projects in the area, said he was taken aback by hydro's idea when he heard about it this week.

"These buildings should be an alive, living part of our neighbourhood," he said. "And the fact that they would cease to exist perpetually, forever, is kind of blowing my mind. If people don't know the Exchange ... this is not the peripheral, out in the boondocks. This is right in the middle. I'm just stunned."

The Allen Building, at 288 McDermot (also known as the Wilson Building), was built in 1905. The adjacent Daylight Building was built in 1904 and the neighbouring Glengarry Block was built in 1910. The latter two buildings were built by turn-of-the-century railway baron John Duncan McArthur.

Winnipeg's Exchange encompasses about 20 city blocks in downtown Winnipeg, just north of the famed intersection of Portage and Main. The area gets its name from the Winnipeg Grain Exchange, the centre of the grain industry in Canada, which developed in Winnipeg between 1881-1918.

Hydro said Thursday it is "reviewing its overall plans for improving electrical service and meeting growing demand for downtown Winnipeg." This includes a plan to expand its existing King Street substation into the three historic buildings, the utility said.

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