

'Power' play in the Exchange

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At first glance, the idea is a little shocking.

Manitoba Hydro is interested in converting three historic multi-storey buildings -- adjacent to each other on McDermot Avenue between Princess and King Streets in the Exchange District -- to a small power substation. Although details of the plan -- including total cost and time lines are sketchy -- the plan being considered is to expand a substation currently at 64 King St. which already borders the three buildings.

"We need to expand that station to modernize and meet growing demand in the downtown area," Manitoba Hydro spokesman Glenn Schneider told the Winnipeg Sun.

A Hydro substation in the middle of Winnipeg's jewel -- the historic Exchange District?

A "mini" powerhouse in one of Canada's few urban areas to be declared a national historic site? Just doesn't sound like a sound plan that fits. It does sound like a plan that should get very close scrutiny by the powers that be at city hall before any final go ahead.

The 20-block Exchange District flourishes right now as the cultural centre of the city. It's home to speciality retailers, restaurants, night clubs, galleries and is known as our theatre district.

In recent years council has treaded carefully when it comes to development projects within the district. It's no time to stop now so they must consider very carefully just how this substation will alter or change the atmosphere and historical significance of the area -- if it will at all. Manitoba Hydro stresses the buildings in question at 288, 290 and 296 McDermot Ave. have city historical designations on them which makes it harder to demolish or damage the facade of them.

"We may want to leave the facades up at the front like they did with the Red River (College) situation," Schneider added.

Good thing because Coun. Jenny Gerbasi, head of the city's historic buildings committee is already coming out swinging against the plan. She says the plan would mean three "glorious" structures would all but disappear -- despite Hydro's assurances.

It's a no-brainer that in a distinct district like the Exchange, filled with beautifully constructed heritage buildings, due diligence should be adhered to when any plan comes before council.

It's true Hydro needs to grow its substation to supply power but this plan sounds way too ambitious to not affect this district immensely. To use the old adage, once it's gone you can't bring it back.

Council needs to be careful this part of our Exchange District doesn't end up desolate and ugly thanks to a power station.

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