RG&E plans to tear down old Beebee plant
Company says buildings near High Falls are not reusable
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Beebee station, the old Rochester Gas and Electric Corp. power plant. The coal-fired plant — the yellow buildings in the center of the image, just above the Genesee River — closed in 1999. RG&E also owns the vacant parcels to the left of the power plant. The company now wants to demolish the buildings. / MAX SCHULTE / Staff file photo 2013

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RG&E, which has just finished demolishing its iconic smokestack at Rochester’s High Falls, has decided to demolish the adjoining power plant in the Genesee River gorge as well.

Rochester Gas and Electric Corp. officials said Beebee Station, a coal-fired generating plant whose oldest section dates back 121 years, is filled with asbestos, lead paint and other hazards and is, in places, structurally unsound.
“It’s well beyond its useful life. We studied the current conditions and determined it’s in the best interest of the community and the ratepayers to ... demolish it,” RG&E spokesman Dan Hucko said.

But that decision, made public only recently, flies in the face of a growing trend in this country and others to clean up and redevelop old urban powerhouses.

High Falls advocates, who quietly lobbied Rochester Gas and Electric Corp. and New York state regulators to have Beebee sold to someone who would breathe new life into it, say they’re disappointed.

“It’s easier to just let it go. But there are plenty of power plants that have readapted, sometimes to incredible ends,” said Michael Philipson, who heads a design and marketing firm in High Falls and is a leader of the Greentopia eco-fest and GardenAerial project there.

A spokesman for Rochester Mayor Thomas Richards, himself a former chairman and chief executive of RG&E, said the city has “great interest” in the Beebee Station’s fate. Gary Walker said Richards plans to meet soon with company officials to discuss the matter.

“While the city’s first impulse is always reuse and adaptation, we are mindful of the past activities at the old station and that it has been out of service for several years. We will be interested in learning about its current condition. We do not know how extensive any repair, remediation and preservation would be,” Walker said Monday.

RG&E also owns about 17.5 acres of land on the Beebee site, records show, including a piece of flatland at the bottom of the gorge that extends nearly to the base of the 96-foot-high waterfall.

Hucko said there is no firm plan yet for disposition of the land.

Just a decade ago, RG&E officials offered Beebee tours to developers and told reporters they’d love to sell the million-square-foot complex. City of Rochester officials, then intent on turning High Falls into an entertainment district, also talked up redevelopment of Beebee Station and said they wanted land near the base of the falls for a city park.
In many cities, the shells of coal-fired power plants that closed for environmental or economic reasons have been, to employ a current phrase, adaptively reused.

A shuttered power plant on the Thames River in London became the famed Tate Modern art museum, for instance. Century-old powerhouses in Queens and San Diego became high-end condominiums, a plant in Chicago became a charter school, a facility on the Lake Ontario shoreline in Toronto is now an art gallery and a plant on Baltimore’s Inner Harbor houses restaurants, retail outlets and offices.

Other adaptive reuse projects are in the works in such places as Austin, Texas and Richmond, Va. — and in Yonkers, Westchester County, where U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-NY, earlier this year helped secure federal tax credits for a $250 million project to transform an old hulk on the Hudson River into a convention center, hotel and restaurants.

In Rochester, however, RG&E has set aside any thoughts of a similar project.

Philipson, who’s met with company officials and toured Beebee Station, was informed several weeks ago that RG&E intends to demolish the generating plant. Company spokesman Hucko confirmed that decision to the Democrat and Chronicle last week, saying that tearing down the cluster of connected buildings was “the safest, most economical and most beneficial course of action.”

“We’ve told all who’ve asked the structures really are not suitable for reuse and need to be demolished,” he said. Demolition of RG&E’s coal-fired Russell Station in Greece is to begin next year, and the company hopes to save money by hiring the same contractor to tear down Beebee, too.

Philipson believes said the company should at least try to find someone willing to redevelop the site.

“It is disappointing that all they can say is that it’s the best thing for the ratepayers. But it’s going to cost a fortune to demolish that thing,” he said. “If you haven’t investigated the possibility of selling the structures to a developer without the giant cost of razing them, have you done what’s best for the ratepayers?”

While he acknowledges he’s no engineer, Philipson said the buildings appeared “pretty buttoned up” and in rough but decent shape.
What makes them so attractive is the form dictated by their function: They housed huge generators that were lifted by overhead cranes when maintenance or repair was needed, so there are vast galleries extending up from the ground floor.

“What you have is a series of these giant atrium spaces that could be adapted in a number of ways,” Philipson said. “Some have an Art Deco look, others are from the 1940s and ’50s. Our thought is you don’t see this kind of atrium, with four or five stories. A building like that offers an opportunity for performance space, or art exhibition space.”

Philipson said he and colleagues who organize the Greentopia celebration or the GardenAerial project at High Falls do not have the time or money to try to persuade RG&E to change its mind, or to pressure the state Public Service Commission to change it for them. “We would welcome partners or collaborators who would help look at the option of not demolishing them,” he said.

Whether RG&E is persuaded or not, Philipson believes the property should be devoted to the public weal.

“Industry really took away the river from the citizens. Now, it’s about how do you get people back to the water,” he said. “They need to give that land, or those buildings and that land, back to the citizens.”