

LONG ISLAND / [TOWNS](#)

Preservationists seek to save 'endangered' 1897 power plant eyed for demolition



Richard Wines, chairman of Riverhead's Landmarks Preservation Committee, outside Perkins Electric Generating Plant, which was listed by Preservation Long Island as "endangered." Credit: Newsday/Steve Pfof

By **Tara Smith**

tara.smith@newsday.com

Updated February 7, 2024 7:08 pm

 [SHARE](#)

History buffs are racing to save a 19th century power plant from the wrecking ball in Riverhead, just weeks after it was listed as an endangered historic site.

Demolition of the Perkins Electric Generating Plant was scheduled to begin this month, but PSEG Long Island, which owns the plant on West Main Street, has agreed to hold off. The delay buys time for preservationists to come up with a plan to save the plant — one of the earliest sources of electricity on Long Island.

"It's one of the few reminders of a very important element of the town's history," said Richard Wines, a historian who chairs the town's [Landmarks Preservation Committee](#). The Peconic River was once dotted with several mills

and industries in the 19th century, Wines said.

The power plant, built in 1897 to house a steam engine, is now boarded up and covered in creeping vines and graffiti. It stands on the site of a former woolen mill owned by John Perkins, an English immigrant who became a key Riverhead businessman.

His sons later expanded the business, using excess water power at the mill to form an electric company. The plant was acquired by the Long Island Lighting Company in 1922, according to Preservation Long Island.

The Perkins family was influential in both town politics and business. There are several historic buildings in Riverhead that were gifts from the family, including a carriage house that is better known today for [selling used books](#) at the Riverhead Free Library.

The plant is not listed as a town landmark, which could protect against demolition. It was one of [seven historic sites](#) listed by Preservation Long Island as “endangered” in December because it had fallen into disrepair.

PSEG spokesperson Elizabeth Flagler said in an email that the building is not used for electric operations and was abandoned long before 2014, when the company took over the electric grid.

Flagler said the utility is “happy to have discussions with the involved parties,” but did not specify a timeline.

In a memo to town officials, PSEG said the building poses a public safety risk and liability to the company. Inspections showed the structure and roof are compromised, according to the document.

Officials said demolition of the plant wouldn't pose environmental risks.

"All the equipment was removed a very long time ago and the structure is only a brick shell," Flagler said.

The PSEG memo says the utility would clean up the site if it were to demolish the structure, adding no replacement structure is planned.

The town can't afford to purchase and preserve the property, according to Supervisor Tim Hubbard.

"We need to put our thinking hats on and figure out what, if anything, can be done here," Hubbard said. "Or whether it's just going to be a sad piece of history that leaves us."

Wines already has some ideas for the site, located on the banks of the Peconic River near existing fishing access and boat launch sites.

"It would make a great environmental science facility," he said, that could be used to expand kayaking and canoeing as well as science and history education.

The committee plans to research grant opportunities and potential partnerships with the Long Island Science Center or Long Island Aquarium, both based in Riverhead.

Wines said there aren't any solid estimates of what the project could cost.

He pointed to the \$25 million [energy and nature center](#) at Jones Beach built in 2020 as inspiration. That project included funding from LIPA.

"PSEG should be part of the solution," Wines said, adding that the Perkins plant is an opportunity "to do something nice out here on the East End."

By Tara Smith
tara.smith@newsday.com

MORE ON THIS TOPIC