

## How can we improve the ByWard Market building? Electrical outlets would be a good start

*Gone are many of the fresh produce stalls, the daily grocery shoppers, and the farmers. The building is a vestige of the city's earliest years.*

By Marlo Glass \* Published May 02, 2025



ByWard Market Heritage Hall in Ottawa. PHOTO BY JEAN LEVAC /POSTMEDIA

A bakery proudly displaying photos of former U.S. President Barack Obama's 2009 trip to Ottawa, mass-produced Canadiana souvenirs and under-utilized seating is likely not what Lieut.-Colonel John By had in mind when he established the first iteration of the ByWard Market building in 1827.

At an integral time in Ottawa (then Bytown's) history, the ByWard Market Hall was an anchor of the community, a place for labourers building the Rideau Canal to gather.

Then came the fire. Then a rebuild. Then "24 stalls, six store places, a basket market, lunch room, check room, and accommodation for 125 farmers' vehicles," according to Heritage Ottawa. Then came a period of decline in the 1960s, followed by some rehabilitation in the late 1970s. Rinse and repeat in the late '90s.

Nearly 200 years later, the building we know today stands as the fifth iteration of Ottawa's public market. But it's a shadow of its former function, a vestige of the city's earliest years. Long gone are the chickens and livestock, the horses and buggies, the day labourers looking for a quick meal. Gone are many of the fresh produce stalls, the daily grocery shoppers, the farmers waking up before dawn to trek into the city and set up shop.

In its place is a structure that's lost much of what made it iconic to begin with, and a growing chorus of voices is stating what is obvious to those who've ever walked its halls: the place needs an upgrade.

Ask Rideau-Vanier Stephanie Plante what she'd do with a pile of money for the Byward Market building, and her answer is shockingly simple: more electrical outlets.

*"We need dollars to be spent on infrastructure," she said, adding that the historic brick building needs to be brought into the modern age. "We need massive investments just in basic infrastructure."*

Without something as basic as electrical outlets, it's hard to light up Christmas trees, and especially hard to attract certain businesses the rest of the year.



Ottawa City Councillor Stéphanie Plante. PHOTO BY JULIE OLIVER /POSTMEDIA

The city developed its \$129 million plan for the ByWard Market nearly five years ago, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. It lays out a neighbourhood with pedestrian-friendly streets, an improved food market, green spaces, and other visitor-friendly upgrades.

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So far, though, the city hasn't budgeted to bring the plan into reality, despite having secured provincial funding for an early phase, which includes improving public space on William Street, next to the ByWard Market building.

The city says it's currently running a feasibility analysis on the business case and cost to redevelop city-owned assets in the ByWard Market.

"The financial business case will identify potential opportunities for investment by the private sector, the City of Ottawa, and senior levels of government," said Amanda Mullins, manager of ByWard Market Strategic Projects for the City of Ottawa.

Plante's blue-sky dream of what success looks like for the Market building involves mothers pushing strollers while shopping for dinner, boutique fitness classes, children playing on play structures, and a spontaneous pickup basketball game among neighbours who live in the nearby high rises.

"I know a lot of people say, 'I miss the old market with the chickens for sale,'" she said. But she says the reality of a modern, northern city means the building's revitalization should focus on families, not farm animals.

"If we start to see strollers, that means a mom on maternity leave is coming down to grab a coffee, grab some groceries, grab the funky thing she's gonna make for dinner, and then she's comfortable enough to take that stroller home," Plante said. "And we're good."



A top-down view of the ByWard Market. PHOTO BY TONY CALDWELL /POSTMEDIA

Ottawans don't have to drive far to see the huge potential of a downtown market building. Many success stories are found in downtown Toronto at the St. Lawrence Market. The city spends around \$5.3 million per year to run it six days a week.

St. Lawrence's origins are similar to those of the ByWard Market; In the early 1800s, the former City of York developed the area as a marketplace for local farmers, who came to the city and traded their cattle and other livestock. A farmer's market has taken place on those lands since that time.

Daniel Picheca, manager of the St. Lawrence Market Complex, said the city's vision for the market today is a place where food, art and culture intersect.

Over the years, Toronto's Market District has grown to host more than 60 vendors, operating six days a week, with many stalls selling seafood, baked goods, produce and meat, as well as a handful of prepared food vendors.

"Our focus, currently, is to continue to assure it is a public food market, an authentic market, as opposed to shifting to prepared food," he said.

That's mostly to cater to the needs of the market's main clientele: Young, urban professionals who live in downtown Toronto, within walking distance of the market.

Those coveted customers come to the market two to three times a week to do their routine shopping, but the market is also a draw to "day-trippers" from the Greater Toronto Area who come in to do a Saturday shop, as well as other tourists from further afield, Picheca said.

The St. Lawrence market has always been a community anchor for the neighbourhood, he said. It's so popular, in fact, that the residential area has grown because people want to live nearby.

Can ByWard take a chapter from the St. Lawrence Market? Why do some markets flourish, while others flail?

"You constantly need to invest in your market," Picheca said. "You need to ensure there's enough capital there to continue to upgrade your facility."

He added that it's important to get feedback from clientele and business owners because "the landscape can change quite a bit." Decades earlier, larger families with several children shopped at the market, he said. Now, demographic shifts see smaller families.

Toronto's main goal is to grow its market by incorporating "art, history, community and food."

Picheca said he's been to the ByWard Market and that he's a part of a larger networking group of market operators.

"By investing, how do you find that balance between investing in the neighbourhood, upgrading your facility, dealing with all the other issues out there?" he asks.



A shopper walks through St. Lawrence Market in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2023. PHOTO BY COLE BURSTON /BLOOMBERG

Should Byward be a farmer's market? A hobby network? A place for tourists? Locals?

Zachary Dayer of the ByWard Market District Authority (BMDA) said there are many competing opinions on the building's function.

He said the BMDA is focused on adding value for tenants and attracting residents to the area. "How can we promote the value of being in a public space?"

There's an "incredible opportunity" for the city to upgrade the building's infrastructure, Dyer added point to its power system and roof, but the challenge in defining the ByWard Market building's public space in the context of other Ottawa marquee destinations, like Lansdowne Park and LaBreton Flats.

"The idea of public markets and public space is something that's just been reinventing or redefining itself, decade over decade, century over century," he said. "And I think we just keep coming back to that concept of really simply a place where people can gather."

The market building, he said, can function as a beacon to remind people to empty their Amazon carts in favour of shopping local.

"It's about generating the dollars to help fund the community," he said.

As for the future of the building, Dayer said there's been "very little conversation about what this looks like."



File photo: Zachary Dayler, executive director of Ottawa Markets. Friday, Dec. 10, 2021. PHOTO BY ERROL MCGIHON /POSTMEDIA

The ByWard Market is the “anchor” of the neighbourhood, Dayler said, and gets about 22 million visits per year.

“We should want to come down here. Critical mass is what’s needed, and critical mass will improve it,” he said.

Some 200 years ago, a bell would ring each morning when the market opened.

“I’m ringing that bell now,” Dayler said. “Come to the market. Spend. Explore. It’s going to be a challenge, but there’s value in dust on the bottle.”