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The secret to genomes? Lotsa juice

Few buildings in the city can power data-heavy business. Here's one.

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BY JEREMY SMERD
JULY 29, 2012 12:01 A.M.

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While Gov. Andrew Cuomo helped broker a deal between Consolidated Edison and its biggest union last week in the name of keeping the electricity flowing, a less heralded but perhaps more significant power play was made by the New York Genome Center.

The 11-institution medical research group announced its plan to build a \$47 million headquarters at 101 Sixth Ave. The deal would have been unlikely were it not for another building, 375 Pearl St., the 32-story structure at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge known for the Verizon sign that adorns it. Last year, Seattle-based Sabey Corp. bought 375 Pearl for \$120 million, drawn by a rare feature that owes its existence to the building's origin as a switching center for the old New York Telephone Co.: access to a huge amount of electricity.

"Access to that power is, in our view, probably worth more than the building," CEO Dave Sabey said, "because you just can't replicate that infrastructure."

Data-heavy businesses in finance, technology and health care increasingly need nearby high-speed data warehouses to help them execute complex algorithms at the speed of light. Those warehouses need major wattage.

Few buildings in the city have 375 Pearl's electricity access. One exception is Google's Ninth Avenue building, a former Port Authority headquarters and freight station. Another is 60 Hudson St., the former Western Union building that's now a full-block telecom structure acting as a worldwide Internet hub.

The Pearl Street data center will ultimately be able to draw as much as 40 megawatts of electricity. The juice will help power the New York Genome Center's immense data volume. Each sequenced genome generates 130 gigabytes. After two years, the center expects to have 5 petabytes (or 5 million gigabytes) of information. Most will be stored at Sabey's data warehouses in Washington state (where electricity and space are cheaper) and connected via a secure network to 375 Pearl, which will serve as a hub for scientists at the center's Sixth Avenue centerpiece.

Given the limited supply of these juiced-up buildings and the cost of outfitting them, Mr. Sabey expects competitors in many fields to increasingly collaborate on their data needs.

"Not one of these research institutions," he said of the genome group's members, "has the money to buy the computing infrastructure necessary to really be able to model these massively complex interactions between genetic communities."

A version of this article appears in the July 30, 2012, print issue of Crain's New York Business as "The secret to genomes? Lotsa juice".

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