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Commentary: Hughes should resign from port authority board

Hughes would be unable to serve on the board he appointed himself to because of a law that he helped pass.



Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune House Speaker Greg Hughes, R-Draper facilitators of the Utah Safe Schools Commission unveiled several recommendations the commission is considering to improve campus safety, Wednesday, June 20, 2018 during a press conference at the Utah Capitol.

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It was heartening to see Speaker Greg Hughes adamantly argue in favor of following the letter of the law during the stalled first meeting of the Utah Inland Port Authority earlier this week. His willingness to “debate this right now” with Gov. Gary Herbert over ambiguities in the board’s conflict of interest requirements was a signal that Hughes wanted to get the inland port started on the right side of the law.

However, Hughes may have had other reasons to delay taking the oath of office that would begin his service on the inland port board. As speaker of the House, Hughes has the power to appoint someone to the board, which came with conflict-of-interest provisions that prohibited the service of those who own property within five miles of

the port's boundaries. He used this power to appoint himself and now, thanks to the reporting of The Salt Lake Tribune, we learn that Hughes has ties to multiple properties within those boundaries.

In other words, Hughes would be unable to serve on the board he appointed himself to because of a law that he helped pass during this past session.

Hughes claims he was previously unaware this property buffer had been changed from two to five miles in a last-minute substitution of the bill. Even so, now that he is aware that property he owns disqualifies him from serving on the board, he should hold true to the argument that he forcefully made in preventing the board's meeting. Hughes should follow the letter of the law and rescind his appointment to the Utah Inland Port Authority.

Sen. Don Ipson, owner of a trucking company, resigned from his appointment to the Inland Port board because of property he owns within the five-mile boundary.

Hughes, on the other hand, is holding on to his self-appointment and wants the Legislature to possibly get rid of the very law that disqualifies him from serving on the board.

The Inland Port is expected to be one of the largest, if not the largest, development projects in the history of our state. Lawmakers already cast a cloud over the port by swapping bills in the midnight hours of the session at the expense of Salt Lake City residents and officials. Public trust in the project will only continue to erode if Utahns now have reason to suspect that those in charge of guiding the port's development could possibly be profiting handsomely because of their decisions.

Hughes is no stranger to combatting accusations of ethical violations. A decade ago, he was the subject of an investigation for bribery charges. Last year, he was accused of not being fully transparent in his business holdings on his legislative disclosure forms, possibly in violation of state law. As he gives up his gavel and seat later this

year to gear up for a likely gubernatorial race in 2020, one would think Hughes would do everything in his power to build trust in his public service, rather than give additional reasons to doubt his honesty.

Hughes should resign from his position on the Utah Inland Port Authority and reappoint someone in his stead. If not just for the sake of his obvious future political ambitions, he should do so because a project as large as the inland port should be completely clear of ethical doubts.

And perhaps more importantly, he should resign because serving on this board would violate a law that he not only voted for, but that he championed earlier this week by postponing the start of the very board the law created.

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