

The Salt Lake Tribune

House Speaker Greg Hughes steps down from Inland Port board less than a week after his property holdings came to light



(Leah Hogsten | Tribune file photo) Rep. Ray Ward, R-Bountiful and 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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House Speaker Greg Hughes, who appointed himself to serve on the board of the Utah Inland Port, has resigned from the position amid controversy involving his property holdings so close to the planned shipping-and-receiving trade hub in Salt Lake City that they disqualified him from membership.

Hughes, who has been a vocal proponent of the port, owns several properties within five miles of the sprawling project's boundaries, The Salt Lake Tribune reported last week.

SB234, which created the port, said board members can't own properties within that buffer zone. Hughes said he was unaware his holdings — several apartment developments in Salt Lake City — were within five miles of the boundaries of the

24,000-acre port.

Hughes' initial reaction was to push for changes to the law based on his argument that the five-mile buffer wasn't a good way to screen out conflicts of interest. He hoped his colleagues in the House and Senate would agree if they were called into a special session by Gov. Gary Herbert.

Herbert, also a vocal proponent of the port's development, said he had no intention of calling a special session of the Legislature to change the law. Sen. Jerry Stevenson, who sponsored SB234, likened a special session to address Hughes' conflict to a "dog and pony show."

Hughes announced Rep. Francis Gibson, R-Mapleton, would replace him on the board. Gibson, the House majority whip, was the House sponsor of SB234.

The House significantly amended the bill, made it public and passed it shortly before 10 p.m. on the eve of the final day of the legislative session in March. The Senate quickly concurred, leaving Salt Lake City leaders furious and fighting for changes.

Hughes, who was guest hosting a radio show when he announced his departure, didn't respond to a request for comment.

His resignation from the board also throws into question Hughes' future in the public spotlight at a time when he's widely believed to be eyeing a run for governor in 2020.

Hughes isn't running for re-election this year, meaning he'll lose the publicity of being House speaker at the end of the year. A spot on the board – and particularly if he was chosen to be the board's chairman – would have put Hughes at the center of what business leaders describe as the most significant economic development project in Utah history.

It's not clear whether Salt Lake City Councilman James Rogers is still on the board. Rogers also owns property near the port boundaries. He hasn't responded to multiple requests for comment on his property ownership.

A City Council spokesman didn't know Tuesday whether Rogers had stepped down.

SB234 gave a seat on the board to "the member of the Salt Lake City Council" that represents the district that includes the port.

But the boundaries in the bill spanned two council districts: Rogers' and that of Councilman Andrew Johnston, whose west-side district includes a significant portion of the port. Amid the ambiguity in the law, the two councilmen agreed that Rogers, whose district includes more of the port, should sit on the board.

Johnston, who doesn't own property within the buffer zone, said last week he continued to support his colleague on the board after his property holdings came to light, but added that he would be willing and able to take the seat if needed.

"We're going to talk as a council and get a sense for what we want to do," Johnston said Tuesday.

Hughes' interests in Salt Lake City apartment buildings weren't listed on his conflict of interest statement filed annually with the Legislature. Instead, he listed only the name of a single holding company, Steelers Holdings.

The Tribune discovered the Hughes had a stake in at least eight properties that fall within the five-mile buffer zone.

The governor applauded Hughes' decision to take himself out of the mix. "We appreciate Speaker Hughes' desire to have a successful inland port in Utah," he said in a tweet. "We respect his decision to step aside from the Inland Port Authority Board at this time."

He also praised the selection of Gibson as a "strong choice" to take the board seat.

The government watchdog group Alliance for a Better Utah also welcomed Hughes' decision Tuesday.

“We’re pleased to see Speaker Hughes following the letter of the law by resigning from his self-appointed position on the Inland Port Authority,” said Chase Thomas, policy and advocacy counsel at the group.

“As the Legislature considers any future changes to legislation authorizing the port, we urge lawmakers to heed the concerns of Governor Herbert, who recently expressed hesitance in changing any conflict of interest requirement related to the port.”

The fledging United Utah Party had raised the first criticism of Hughes’ appointment of himself to the board, saying such self-selection was inappropriate and calling on him to resign from the trade board.



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