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## **Columbia's leadership | Five Points deal questioned**

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Columbia City Council challenger Cameron Runyan is accusing incumbent Daniel Rickenmann of profiting from a controversial Five Points project that could include \$6 million in city-funded public parking.

An attorney for the State Ethics Commission said there is no violation, and Rickenmann dismissed the charge as eleventh-hour political grandstanding.

The election is Tuesday.

At issue is a project known as Five Points South, a six-story condo, retail and public parking development planned for Saluda Avenue in Five Points where Kenny's Auto Supply store used to be.

City Council members voted in February 2007 to join Five Points South by building a public parking garage as part of the project. A final vote on the deal has not been taken.

After that, developers Ron Swinson and Stan Harpe bought the property from Kenneth Hooks for \$3.3 million, a record price for Five Points.

Hooks, in order to get around costly capital gains taxes, needed to buy property or properties of similar value so he could do what is known as a tax-deferred exchange, his attorney Michael Tighe said.

Hooks had 45 days to identify the properties or pay the tax, Tighe said.

One of the properties Hooks' broker identified was the Birds on a Wire building on Devine Street, which Rickenmann owned.

In June, Hooks purchased the building for \$1.95 million; records indicate Rickenmann bought the property for \$1.45 million.

Bill Owen, Rickenmann's business partner, said the partners made a profit of less than \$500,000.

Rickenmann runs the partners' restaurants while Owen handles the real estate deals.

"Daniel really doesn't have anything to do with it," Owen said of the deal with Hooks. "This is clearly last-minute mudslinging."

Runyan said Rickenmann should not have voted on the project to "prevent the appearance of any impropriety" and should recuse himself from voting on Five Points South issues in the future.

"At a minimum, this doesn't pass the smell test," Runyan said at a news conference he called Friday across the street from the property in question.

Cathy Hazelwood, an attorney with the State Ethics Commission, said there is no violation because Rickenmann is not connected with any of the partners in the Five Points South deal.

"Runyan's got nothing," she said. "He thinks it looks bad."

The city's participation in the Five Points South deal was key to developers Swinson and Harpe purchasing the former Kenny's site at Blossom and Saluda Avenue. They paid \$80 per square foot, a record price for the village.

Runyan said the deal violated the spirit if not the letter of ethics laws, and he termed the city's and Rickenmann's participation in the Five Points South project "a sweetheart deal."

Runyan has made the Five Points South Project a centerpiece of his campaign for the citywide seat. The project is opposed by some key neighborhood leaders in the district, especially many residents of the Wales Garden neighborhood, across Blossom Street.

The project is in District 3, which is expected to have a high voter turnout because of a contested race between Brian Boyer, Belinda Gergel and Reed Swearingen. Boyer and Gergel have raised and spent record amounts of money for a district race.

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