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City council race | Rivals clash over Five Points plan

By ADAM BEAM

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A proposed residential and retail building in Five Points has become the centerpiece of a feisty campaign for an at-large City Council seat.

Cameron Runyan, who is trying to unseat first-term incumbent Daniel Rickenmann, has made accusations of cronyism and negligence about the deal that could potentially put a \$5.8 million public parking garage on the site.

The project sits on property that contains high levels of benzene, an additive in gasoline that can cause cancer.

"The bottom line is this is bad," Runyan said. "And if I didn't stand up and call it out, nobody was going to listen."

Candidates squared off about the issue at a debate Thursday night.

Developers Ron Swinson and Stan Harpe have approval from the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control to install temporary monitoring wells at the site — which they say is all they are required to do.

"Unfortunately, he's using scare tactics," Swinson said. "I would hope somebody running for public office would have more integrity than that."

Swinson and Harpe want to put a six-story building on the property with a drugstore and a bank on the first level and upscale condos on the higher levels. In-between those levels, the city is considering building two levels of parking for \$5.8 million.

Rickenmann said he has not decided if he supports the project, even though he voted to authorize city staff to prepare a contract.

"No money has exchanged hands nor has a contract been signed," Rickenmann said. "You can put any numbers on a piece of paper, but the rubber meets the road when you have a contract and you see it in black and white and it is a legal, binding document."

The project has considerable opposition from some Five Points business owners and residents in nearby neighborhoods who think the building is too tall for the mostly two-story urban village. Opponents support another parking plan that would build a garage behind the Claussen's Inn farther up Harden Street.

Earlier this month, City Council members voted 6-1 to authorize city staff to negotiate a contract with Swinson and Harpe for the parking garage. Rickenmann, who Runyan is trying to unseat, voted yes.

Runyan has called a news conference for 3 p.m. today about the issue.

Those documents come from a 2006 test of the groundwater at the site at 700 Saluda Ave. An environmental testing company drilled 16 wells on the property. In one of them, benzene levels were 205 parts per billion. Acceptable levels are 5 parts per billion.

Runyan has seized on this information, announcing it at a Wednesday night meeting of the Five Points Association, attended mostly by people who opposed the project.

"There was known contamination, high levels of contamination on this piece of property, prior to the city entering into an agreement with this developer," Runyan said.

In the 2007 agreement between the city and developers, the city agreed to buy the "air rights" — or the city's portion of the property — for \$1 million.

That \$1 million is included in the \$5.8 million cost of the parking garage, which comes from a loan the city received that had to be spent on parking.

Runyan fears the city will be liable for any environmental hazards that stem from the project.

Runyan has called the whole thing a "sweetheart deal" between the city and the developers, noting Swinson donated money to Rickenmann's 2004 City Council campaign. Swinson has not donated to Rickenmann's campaign this year.

"It is representative of the dysfunction and inside-closed-door dealings going on at every level of city government right now," Runyan said.

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