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Saltzman asks for delay to urban renewal vote on David Douglas school

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Portland City Commissioner Dan Saltzman on Friday asked his colleagues to delay a crucial but controversial vote next week on a plan to spend money set aside for downtown redevelopment on a new elementary school for outer Southeast Portland.

In a letter, Saltzman asked his fellow commissioners and Mayor Tom Potter for a six week delay in the vote that is scheduled for Wednesday in order to amend the proposal.

The move is the first sign that the council's so-far unwavering support for the idea may be headed for trouble. But it could also signal a compromise that might quiet opponents of the plan who have threatened a lawsuit to stop it.

After hearing testimony on the subject earlier in the week, Saltzman said his support for the original idea waned because of the threat of a drawn-out court battle.

The idea was to take \$19 million from a lucrative downtown urban renewal program to build a much-needed elementary school in the David Douglas School District. But experts in urban renewal protested, saying that creating a "satellite district" and spending property tax money earmarked for downtown, however benevolent, would violate state law.

Instead, Saltzman has asked the Portland Development Commission, which oversees the city's 11 urban renewal districts, to examine whether the school property could be added into the nearby Lents urban renewal area through a contiguous boundary change. This way might allow the project to go forward sooner, he said.

Saltzman said the needs of the school district -- its schools are at capacity as enrollment has shot up in recent years -- may once have justified the calculated legal risks of dipping into the downtown pot. But moving forward might bog the idea down in court or in potential legislative changes.

"It's troubling to allow the future of families and school children David Douglas to be left to lawyers, legislators and lobbyists," Saltzman wrote.

He said he would move to delay the vote to Aug. 6.

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