

The Post and Courier

Anti-cruise ship forces overstate support by neighborhoods

Wednesday, July 20, 2011

In the controversy over the State Ports Authority's planned cruise terminal at Union Pier, three actions of the Ansonborough and Charlestowne neighborhood associations and the Preservation Society of Charleston convinced me that the methods they were using to oppose the plan were either poorly founded or in bad faith or both: first, Ansonborough's endorsement of Charlestowne's impracticable petition for state intervention; next, the Preservation Society's insidious proposal that Charleston be placed on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's "most endangered sites" list; and last, the two associations' and the society's joining the ill-grounded, and hence possibly futile, litigation prompted by the Coastal Conservation League.

As a member who attended the two special meetings of the Ansonborough association on the petition and the lawsuit, I can address that organization's decisions.

Bear in mind that the lawsuit's complaint states that the association has "approximately 240 members." At its March meeting held to discuss the petition, 38 members were present, of whom 30 voted to endorse it and eight voted against it.

At its May meeting called to consider the lawsuit, 30 members were present, of whom 23 voted to join it and 7 voted against it. Those paltry 30 pro-petition votes and 23 pro-lawsuit votes constitute the vaunted "overwhelming" opposition of Ansonborough.

A pro-lawsuit vote of less than 10 percent of some 240 members does not fairly represent the association's membership as a whole, let alone the entire neighborhood. Despite assurances that the association would bear none of the cost of the lawsuit, the association's dragging all its "approximately 240 members" into litigation on the basis of no more than 23 votes seems irresponsible and out of proportion to its effect.

Indeed, the influence of all four plaintiff organizations is disproportionate to the number of city residents who are not part of the lawsuit.

First, the memberships of the four overlap, since many members of the two neighborhood associations belong to either of or both the League and the Society.

Second and equally significant, Charleston's other preservation group, considered by many to be the more prestigious, and the other neighborhood associations, which number in the dozens, have not chosen to join the lawsuit.

Were the number of individuals among the four plaintiffs (reduced by taking into account their overlap) to be compared to the number of all city residents who are not opposed to the terminal at Union Pier, the plaintiffs' numbers would likely be dwarfed.

Finally, if the plaintiffs succeeded in restricting cruise activities through local ordinances and cruise lines stopped calling at Charleston in order to avoid onerous regulation, such a severe blow might be dealt to the finances of the SPA -- a state agency charged with keeping in good order one of South Carolina's primary economic engines, its maritime facilities -- that the SPA would be precluded from selling even a portion of its strategically located Union Pier property to private developers. In addition, Charleston is preparing to deepen its harbor (as several competing Atlantic coast ports already have) to accommodate immense post-Panamax ships, a category that includes cruise ships.

And nothing seems to prevent Charleston from adopting a zoning provision similar to the one a rival port, Baltimore, enacted -- a "Maritime Industrial Overlay District" -- to preserve "an area where maritime shipping can be conducted without the intrusion of non-industrial uses and where investment in maritime infrastructure is encouraged."

The combined financial pressure the litigation may thrust on the SPA and the advent of post-Panamax ships could, in the not far distant future, yield a surprise for the plaintiffs: maximized use of Union Pier in the shape of additional moorage for post-Panamax ships.

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